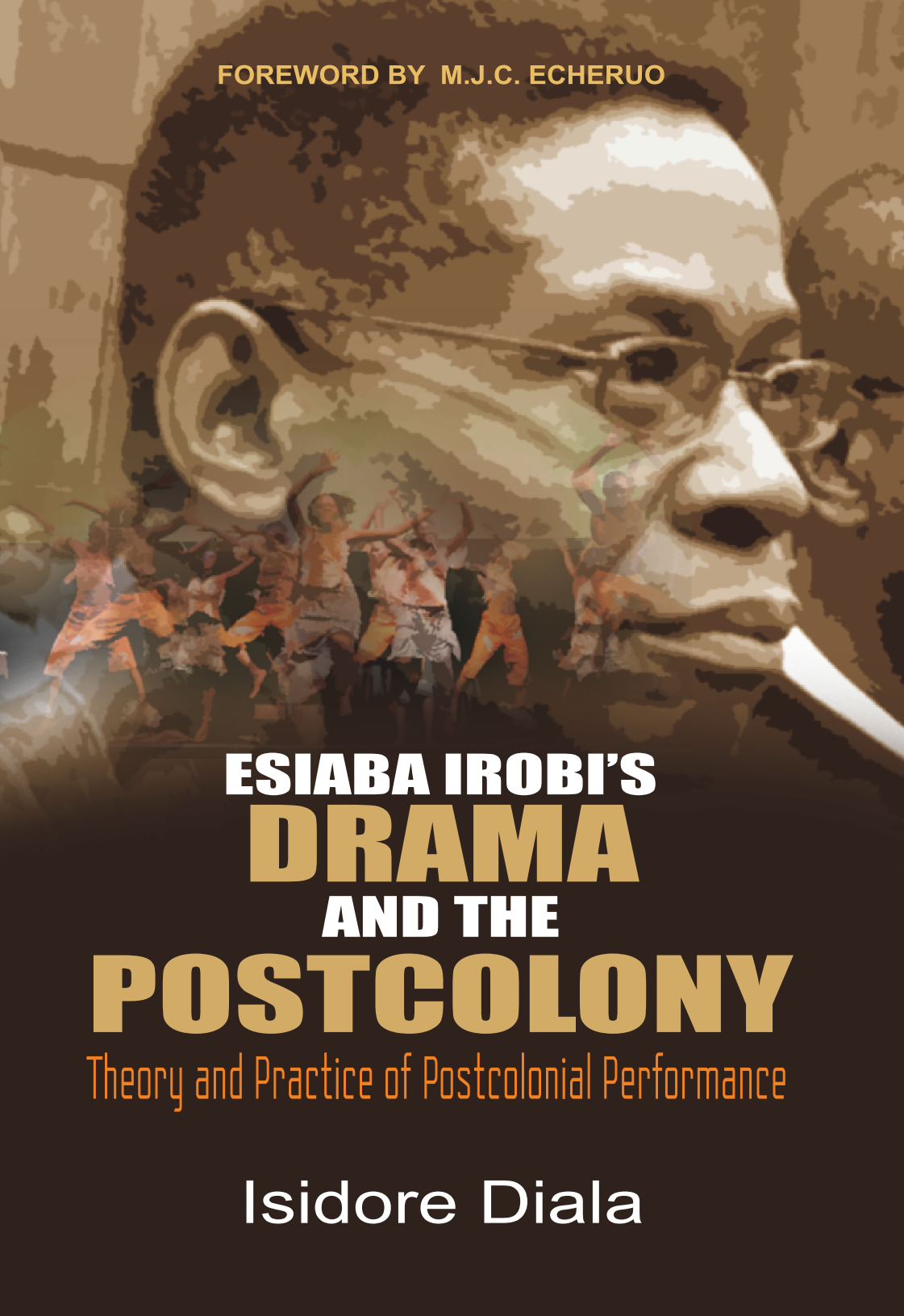




FOREWORD BY M.J.C. ECHERUO

**ESIABA IROBI'S
DRAMA
AND THE
POSTCOLONY**

Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Performance

Isidore Diala

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Isidore Diala



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Dedication

For
Berna, mother and muse:
Who found the strife of battle enthralling,
But the spoils of war loathsome;

and

Chy, Bubes, Chijo, Noly, Too:
Even hearts are base tablets to inscribe
The marvels of your love.

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I wish to thank in a special way Esiaba Irobi's widow, Uloaku, and his special friend, Barr. Georgina Alaukwu-Ehuriah, the two women whose generosity facilitated this work. They shared with me invaluable information, documents, and photographs as well as the zeal to succeed. Irobi's brother, Osundu, his publisher, Mr Clement Asomogha, and his friends Patrick Ibe Okezie, Nnorom Azuonye, Olu Oguibe, A.B.C. Duruaku, and Nnamdi Anumihe likewise obliged me with facts about his life.

I am equally indebted to all colleagues in the Postcolonial unit of the Department of English, Westfälische Wilhelms University, Münster, Germany: Dr Marga Munkelt, Dr Markus Schmitz, and Dr Silke Stroh. They were both friends and family, supportive of my academic endeavour and helpful with the practical arrangements that support life. I'm grateful too to Ms Kerstin Strotman and Frau Sandra Bregulla, who worked as secretaries in the unit, and to Daniel Blenke and Florian Barten for their friendship and assistance.

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Esiaba, this, to the glory of God, is for you! And thank you Lord for your blessings.

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Foreword

Professor Isidore Diala's devotion to Esiaba Irobi's work has finally paid off. *Esiaba Irobi's Drama and the Postcolony: Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Performance* will definitely lead many more people, in Africa and elsewhere, to pay serious attention to the plays and poems of this very gifted man.

I was fortunate to be in the audience in Lagos, Nigeria, when Irobi was posthumously awarded the 2010 LNG Literature Prize. I was deeply touched by Professor Diala's "Introduction" to Irobi in the programme brochure and moved by the eloquent "Citation" on *Cemetery Road*, the prize-winning play, presented by the Award Committee Chairman, Professor Dapo Adelugba of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. That ceremony was in its own way a vindication of Professor Diala's understanding of Irobi's achievement, an understanding now fully documented in this book.

After he moved to the United States in 1997, Irobi, at my request, was kind enough to send me a set of his published work, although he very soon wanted them all back. He was hopeful of soon replacing those volumes with a fresh edition of his plays from a major publisher. That was not to be. I had to obtain a fresh set of photocopies of his work for myself from the US Library of Congress. Professor Diala's book shows how deeply disappointed Irobi was that he did not have the benefit of publication in the West to give him a head-start in his writing career. Matters were not helped when Irobi's revised doctoral thesis was also rejected by the major publisher to whom he first sent it. Irobi mailed the rejection letter to me along with

the revised thesis and asked for suggestions on what further changes he needed to make to have his rather combative, anticolonial, antiracist dissertation properly published. Sadly, Irobi did not live to see his dream realised.

Professor Diala's book puts all this in perspective by situating Irobi's dramas in the context of what he calls Irobi's "three basic fixations": Igbo cosmology and performance; Wole Soyinka (and Yoruba drama); and Nigeria as a postcolony—in other words, the three conditions created by his Igbo heritage, the debates about drama's relationship with the many traditions of African performance, and (very importantly) the nature of the postcolonial condition itself, and the urgent need for a postindependence African cultural revolution.

Professor Diala does a brilliant job of showing how, in spite of obvious differences in subject matter or occasion, all of Irobi's work, including his poems, is of one piece. He does so with much prudence, combining biography, literary criticism, and intellectual history, as, for example, his linking of the substance and style of *Cemetery Road* to strands of thought drawn out from Irobi's wider reading as part of his graduate course work, together with Irobi's shock as he apparently came to more fully understand how fundamental anti-black racism is to European intellectual and imperial civilisation. It is also out of this personal experience of racism in Britain and of his wider reading of other traditions of "performance" that Irobi rediscovers the inevitability of his own emerging commitment to the drama of public rite. *Nwokedi* and *Cemetery Road* are thus the texts that mark Irobi's emergence. It is in *Sycorax*, his adaptation/rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, that Irobi seeks to fully and completely unmask the many faces of centuries of Western racist discourse of the so-called "Other," whether black or female. The play's particular relevance is that all of Irobi's anger, anxiety, frustration, and bitterness are projected on to the reading of every moment of Shakespeare's complicated last play. *Sycorax* is Irobi's last word on Euro-

American racism.

Professor Diala's subtitle, *Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Performance*, is fully justified as the almost encyclopedic coverage of Nigerian theatre history (text and criticism) is integrated thematically with the story of Irobi's own earnest search for an adequate theory that would both answer back (in his own case) to the Igbo mode of dramatic representation while still being relevant to the new social, political, and ethical realities of communities that can no longer be as strictly ethnic as originally, and in settings where the deepest symbols of gesture and action, of song and dance, are no longer understood sympathetically, that is, absorbed and recreated in consciousness as *style*. The book touches on practically every serious influence on African theatre theory and practice of the past half-century. At one end is Wole Soyinka whose example (in *Death and the King's Horseman*) seemed to vindicate Irobi's impulse to set his performance idiom, as Soyinka had done, on the practices of his own cultural base, and at the other, Dr Amankulor, whose pioneering research on Ngwa dramatic rituals encouraged Irobi to try harder at the task. There were influences both foreign and local: foreign schools of "performance", especially at UCLA and New York University, and local authorities, such as the late Professor Ossie Enekwe, Irobi's undergraduate teacher at the University of Nigeria, whose pragmatic view of the business of drama apparently convinced Irobi to push ahead with his reinvigorated pursuit of an alternative native performance style.

This is a book on a subject that has been of great interest to me for a long time. It is also a particularly urbane account of how Irobi, who had practically given up all hope of being ever acknowledged as the leader of a new theatre revolution in Africa, came to be awarded a prestigious national drama prize, posthumously, in the very year of his death.

Professor Diala, meticulous as always, has managed most admirably to respect both the fact of Irobi's volatile

temperament and Irobi's amazing ability to provide material in the very vehemence of his work for that necessary corrective choric insight that enables us begin to see the world whole.

This is an important book.

Michael J.C. Echeruo, PhD; FNAL

William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, *Emeritus*
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

Pre-text

I write this piece as a Fellow of the International Research Centre Interweaving Performance Cultures in Berlin, the very place where Esiaba Irobi, also a Fellow, died in 2010. I never met him, but as a then member of the advisory board, I was involved in his selection. I knew of him as one of the many talented Nigerian writers working abroad at British or American universities. He was, as he often described himself, a writer in exile. His biographical statement at the Research Centre reflects this sense of exile even in his own country: “Esiaba Irobi was born in the Republic of Biafra and has lived in exile in Nigeria, the UK and the USA.” This characteristic anachronism—there was no Republic of Biafra when he was born in 1960—also points to his deep identification with Igbo language and culture, in particular with its traditions of myth and ritual, which are harnessed particularly in his plays. Irobi’s research project in Berlin—“There Is a Thief in All of Us: The Politics and Aesthetics of International Performance in the Age of Globalization”—was as much about his own work as about that of his African compatriots. Like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, he combined by necessity and inclination the dual roles of writer and scholar, often using one to enrich the other. His path as a student led him to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, then to the University of Sheffield, UK, for an MA in Film and Theatre, and from there to a PhD in Theatre Studies from the University of Leeds. His academic career included sojourns at John Moores University in Liverpool, and the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and he achieved

some permanence as Associate Professor of International Theatre and Film Studies at Ohio University, Athens, USA.

This study by Isidore Diala is the first book-length examination of Irobi's work. It portrays a highly creative individual who was literally driven by the creative urge. His output was considerable, but the recognition, as Diala shows, fell short of Irobi's own expectations. There are many reasons for this, not the least being a life spent largely outside the cultural matrix in which the work is so clearly rooted. Irobi was primarily a dramatist, and drama, being the most social of art forms, does not usually take root well outside this matrix. Perhaps more important, Nigeria, in which Irobi came to maturity, was a quite different country than the one where Wole Soyinka, Irobi's great model, returned after study abroad and launched his career. Diala draws our attention to the whole question of publishing, referring to the "cash-and-carry" approach of undercapitalised publishers in Nigeria who cannot provide editorial assistance. Irobi's career is a reminder that the supposed dearth of "good" African drama simply reflects that the major international publishers, such as Oxford and Macmillan, no longer provide the coverage they once did.

Those are important questions, but the focus of Diala's study is on the writer, particularly the dramatist. He locates Irobi's work primarily in the indigenous performance traditions of the Igbo. In many ways, Irobi does for Igbo performance culture what Wole Soyinka did for the Yoruba, drawing on rich oral and ritual traditions and harnessing them for dramatic purposes to fashion syncretic theatre. For Diala, the "signal trope" of Irobi's drama is dance, which forms not just the underlying structure of his dramas but also a metaphor for the "postcolony" and its ambivalent political and cultural heritage. The five chapters of this study illuminate different aspects of Irobi's oeuvre and include a vivid portrayal of Irobi the actor in his dream role of Elesin Oba, the eponymous King's Horseman in Wole Soyinka's drama. Diala highlights Irobi's

fascination for African festivals, which feature prominently in the earlier plays. He also demonstrates that although he is rooted in his Igbo culture, Irobi draws on different ethnic groups, pointing to conceptions of pan-Africanism that include the African diaspora.

As Diala repeatedly emphasises, Irobi's life and writing remain to be discovered by the wider scholarly community. Much of his work remains unpublished. That which has been published has not had a broad circulation. His book project on indigenous theatre, *African Festival and Ritual Theatre: Resisting Globalization on the Continent and Diaspora Since 1492*, remained uncompleted at the time of his death in Berlin. While much is left to be done, this study certainly establishes the coordinates for future scholarly engagement with Irobi's work.

Christopher Balme

Berlin, May 2013.



Introduction

Esiaba Irobi (1960-2010) was one of Africa's most innovative and productive younger playwrights. Deeply rooted in the indigenous performance traditions of his Igbo ethnic group, Irobi's drama, in the tradition of Wole Soyinka, is a hybrid production involving an iconoclastic reconceptualisation of the heritage he appropriates, its fascinating conflation with other performance traditions, and their projection onto the arena of contemporary Nigerian politics. In Irobi's drama, the diverse resources of Igbo oral performances are reappraised and reinvented; ancient Igbo chants re-echo frequently with new inflections and in consonance or counterpoint with songs from other cultures; and as in Greek drama and Soyinka's drama, the enchanted figures of folk imagination are invoked in their contemporary incarnation to enhance our grasp of life's mysteries and the peculiar perplexities of a postcolony. Ironically, haunted by the very conditions he condemned with vigour and passion, Irobi's attempt to create a distinctive dramaturgy, to achieve an original blend and synthesis of the various resources at his disposal, and to attain the distinction that his early career suggested he had both the talent and daring to accomplish was tragically hindered.

The sheer magnitude of Irobi's oeuvre is a tribute to a life of industry, devotion, and tenacity. His published plays include: *The Colour of Rusting Gold* (1989), *Gold*, *Frankincense and Myrrh*

(1989), *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), *Nwokedi* (1991), *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999), *The Fronded Circle* (1999), and *Cemetery Road* (2009). At the time of his sudden death, he was also working on the drafts of many other plays, one of which has been published posthumously, *Sycorax* (2013) (initially titled *The Shipwreck*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Theater, USA). But for *Cemetery Road*, completed in the United Kingdom, and *Sycorax*, written in the United States, all of the other plays were written at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where Irobi had been an undergraduate and later a young faculty member. In several sources, public and private, including interviews, prefatory pages of published plays, and letters to friends, Irobi also referred to manuscripts of other (virtually) completed plays.¹

Including his collections of poetry, *Cotyledons* (1988), *Inflorescence* (1989), and *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* (2005), the Irobi canon is undoubtedly prodigious. Like the consummate stage artist that he was, Irobi wrote most of his poems for oral rendition on stage and recited them with great passion. Here, too, he identified his model as the vitality of the oral poem invariably composed to be sung and performed. In his interview with Nnorom Azuonye, Irobi regarded orature as the most valid, most accessible, and most universal, as well as most relevant form of human poetry, and ascribed to it phenomenal powers: "Orature is what is used to regulate the world from Gregorian chants through Ohafia war songs to Rap." He distinguished poetry from verse and discerned in poetry (as opposed to "verse") a magic and occult force that regenerates and propels life. He located the source of authentic poetry in the realm of nature's mysteries and in the oracular voice of the god and thus illuminated the convictions that accounted for his fixation with Igbo myths and rituals as well as their mode of performance:

Poetry, by definition, is that phenomenal fusion of music

and imagery that creates life and propels life forward in the world [. . .]. Verse is our vain human attempt to capture this force, this magic, this occult force [. . .]. But poetry, real poetry, can only be found in the speech of nature, the power of landscapes, the terror of the dark, the forest and its hallucinations, when *Amadioha*, the god of thunder, clears his throat and voice [. . .]. (“My E-conversation” 49)

For Irobi, the power of oral (African) poetry and performative style to endure and mutate was awesome, and he traced the distinctiveness of African American writing, music, and mode of religious worship to traditional African models. It is thus only to be expected that reviewers of his collections should often note the oral quality of his poetry as well as its compelling music.² Typically, the dialogue of Irobi’s plays is characterised by the lyricism, exuberance of language and fecundity of phrase that give such enormous power to his poetry. This, however, has the expected ironic consequence that the delineation of character through language is marginal, given that most of his characters partake in the apparent profundity and grandiloquence of their creator.³

Remarkable as the Irobi canon is, mere prolificity does not seem to have been the ideal he devotedly aspired to. There were many completed scripts he never attempted to produce, just as there were equally many staged plays he denied publication. He was passionate about literary prizes and proudly listed among his awards the National Gold Gong for playwriting in 1982 for *The Colour of Rusting Gold* and the World Drama Trust Award in 1992 for *Cemetery Road*, both in manuscript. (He also won prizes for poetry and acting and was posthumously awarded Nigeria’s most prestigious literary prize, the Nigeria Liquefied National Gas Prize for literature, for his play *Cemetery Road*, several months after his death in 2010.) And as to be expected for a writer who began with such enormous self-esteem, Irobi desired to have the manuscripts he chose for publication well produced and so remained inconsolable by

the quality of the printing of his published plays.⁴ Thus, as decorated as Irobi's career was, he hardly received the full recognition that he deserved since his work had not been published internationally at the time of his death (and since, moreover, drama continues to receive only modest attention in postcolonial studies).

The Nigerian novelist Chukwuemeka Ike has traced the collapse of the publishing industry in Nigeria after what seemed an auspicious beginning to the economic downturn experienced by the country in the 1980s (when Irobi's writing career was at its peak). Ike identifies publishing as the most unregulated and undercapitalised industry in Nigeria and remarks on the hegemonic role of such foreign publishing companies as Oxford University Press, Longman, Macmillan, Heinemann, Evans, and others, even after the 1978 Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree that stipulated that at least sixty percent equity participation in book publishing must be by Nigerian nationals. Irobi, however, was representative of the many talented emergent Nigerian writers of his generation who failed to attract the attention of these reputable companies and often had to seek an outlet for their works through local undercapitalised and grossly ill-equipped publishing ventures by self-publication. The "cash-and-carry" approach that naturally excludes the peer review system and does not even provide responsible editorial assistance is the unwholesome birthing process through which the bulk of current Nigerian writing, especially by emergent writers, comes into existence in book form. This, of course, accounts for many of its deformities, physical as well as intellectual. Irobi was spared some of the worst of the consequences of this situation.

Introduced to Irobi in 1988 by a mutual friend and Irobi's Nsukka colleague, Chimalum Nwankwo, the president of Abic Publishing Company located in Enugu, Mr Clement Asomugha, who had set up his publishing house a year previously and had been canvassing for talented writers, likened discovering Irobi's

work to unearthing an icon. Hitherto shunned by the better known publishing houses he approached, Irobi showed no particular interest in royalties and had a load of manuscripts many of which, like Irobi's live presentations that he later attended, Mr Asomugha found enthralling. He issued the first three in 1989. Recognising the readers Irobi targeted and their penchant for imprints of the multinational publishing houses, Mr Asomugha found an outlet for marketing Irobi's works through university lecturers and university bookshops in the country and by becoming a familiar figure at book fairs, especially in universities and at the annual national conventions of the Association of Nigerian Authors. Irobi continued to work with Mr Asomugha even after he relocated to the West, publishing only *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems* with another publishing house, Nsibidi. But at the time of his death, he was engaged in editing and revising his plays for a collection he hoped would be issued in a deserving format by a mainstream publishing house in the West, an endeavour among others he could not quite complete. The scope and possibilities that Abic offered were just too narrow, far too restricted, for a writer with his gaze firmly fixed on the baths of the Western stars.

Seeing laurels ideally as emblematic acts of public recognition, Irobi recognised the role international publishing plays in the canonisation of any writer even when he passionately canvassed the embodied theatrical aesthetics of indigenous African performances in which "possession" is privileged. Irobi's career thus illustrates the constraints of the steadfast search for distinction and international recognition in the context of the limitations of local publishing. It equally underscores the fact that the subtle but crucial contest to control the institutions of production, interpretation, and canonisation of texts is in reality a struggle for the power to determine and sanction authorised representations of both the self and the Other; it is the cultural component of the fierce

context for economic and ideological dominance, all the more powerful and insidious for its capacity to disguise its implication in politics. By placing itself in a unique position to project and reward its preferred concept of African artistic excellence by publication, distribution, and the award of prestigious prizes, the West exercises powers that have consequences that go beyond the cultural alone (see Diala).

The three basic fixations of Irobi's career as a playwright were the cosmology and performative heritage of his Igbo ethnic group, the Nigerian postcolony, and Wole Soyinka. The three, however, were integrally linked. Irobi was passionate about the paradoxes that restricted the aspiration of the country to purposeful and responsible nationhood, and held in check the frontiers of human freedom and achievements. His equally deep passion for Soyinka's staging of postcolonial Nigerian experience turned Irobi's attention to the barely explored potentialities of his own Igbo heritage. The Soyinka model, compelling theatrical aesthetics deriving from a triumphant amalgam of the ethnic Yoruba tradition and the European heritage and anchored in the Nigerian political experience, is the paradigm that Irobi enthusiastically adapted. Thus, Irobi's drama foregrounds the processes of the recuperation of indigenous performance traditions and their combination with Western forms as creative and capable of generating new theatrical forms. Given Irobi's use of Soyinka, his drama also complicates even further the fascinating conflation of only approximately related myths and legends that is characteristic of much of postcolonial drama: Igbo deities in Irobi's drama are imaged in the full awareness of their enchanted kin who reside in both the Yoruba and Greek pantheons. Moreover, Irobi explored with deep fascination the liminal space of festivals in which the gods and humans converged as the heart of both African theatrical and religious experience, and he discerned in African music and dance the soul and sinew of that theatrical-religious phenomenon.

Beginning especially with *Nwokedi*, Irobi's signal trope for the ambivalent heritage of the postcolony is the metaphor of the dance, a trope that has a twofold origin in his Igbo background: first, the expression "*egwu ohuru*" (a new dance) is a common Igbo metaphor for a new way of life and secondly, his dramaturgy is rooted in the dance-drama tradition of Igbo festivals. But if a *new dance step* is metonymic of a new attitude to life, the Igbo concept of *egwu* recognises the dance as a response to the stimulus of music. *Iku egwu* (to play music), *Igu egwu* (to sing music), *Igba egwu* (to dance to music): these are fundamental components of a generic conception of music that incorporates the creation of sounds and movements with aesthetic appeal involving the human voice, skilful engagement with instruments, and the human body. In Irobi's drama, music and dance, indigenous and international, in their manifold and conflictual manifestations become a metaphor for the competing epistemological codes that typify the postcolonial state. For adopting an essentially dance-drama structure that is integral to most Igbo ritual-based performances, Irobi explores the postcolonial state as an intriguing clash of diverse traditions of music, song texts, and dances, ranging from a wide variety of indigenous ritual music and dance, classical European music, martial music, and sundry contemporary popular forms deployed as veritable encoded ideological statements. Thus, privileging music and dance in the semiotic scheme of his drama, Irobi valorises a conception of drama that "denaturalises notions of subjectivity as grounded primarily in dialogue. Dance thus emerges as a locus of struggle in producing and representing individual and cultural identity. As a site of competing ideologies, dance also offers potential liberation from imperialist representation through the construction of an active, moving body that speaks its own forms of corporeality" (Gilbert and Tompkins 242).

Irobi denounced "postcolonialism" as distinctively Western, totalising, and typographic. He examined various forms of

African performances for alternative theories that predate colonialism and that are part of the living tradition of the people being *embodied* rather than *scripted*. And until the final phase of his practice as a dramatist, Irobi's engagement with the postcolony highlights it as central and thereby marginalises Europe, except to the extent that the postcolonial praxis is itself a Western invention. Steadfast, though, in striving to recuperate indigenous performance models, he nonetheless dismissed Chinweizu's nativism and acknowledged the inevitable hybridity of contemporary artistic and intellectual productions. He dramatises typical postcolonial themes: oppression, migration and cultural alienation, identity crisis and revolutionary violence; he equally revalidates indigenous traditions, interrogates colonial stereotypes, and consciously seeks to appropriate precolonial African values in seeking a resolution to the postcolonial dilemma.

This study strives to introduce Irobi's work especially to an international audience interested in the genre of drama and theatre generally and in African/postcolonial drama and theatre in particular—for whom that work is meant to have a particular resonance but for whom ironically it is scarcely available. This work also seeks to contextualise Irobi's drama and to begin a sober assessment of his significance as a playwright and performance theorist. The first chapter of this work links Irobi's experience of acting with his articulation of a performance theory, traces them to indigenous forms of ritual that privilege entrancement or possession, and situates the discussion in the context of the relevant scholarly debate on the nature of indigenous Igbo/African theatre. Irobi's first three plays, all published in 1989, are studied in the second chapter and are shown to highlight both his initial soul-searching for instructive models and themes and his earliest fascination with features of the African festival mode. *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of the Mask*, and *The Fronded Circle*, which mark the hegemonic phase of Irobi's career, are studied in the third chapter of this

work. The imaginative depth of his exploration of Igbo life and beliefs in these plays; his evocation of the sense of religious mystery and contextualisation of the terror and exultation of mortals' daring to extend the frontiers of human freedom in defiance of societal prohibitions; his reinvigorating subjection of the resources of Igbo thought and performance forms in these three plays to the demands of contemporary society establish Igbo life and culture as Irobi's forte. Yet, Irobi's devoted study of Soyinka led him to explore closely the Yoruba oral heritage and consequently to make the "Oriki" pivotal in his theory of African performance (as well as to make Yoruba ritual the core of his yet unpublished play, *I Am the Woodpecker That Terrifies the Trees*). Moreover, Irobi's daring immersion in issues and debates of national consequence, his use of casts drawn from different ethnic groups, his setting of the action of his plays in different parts of the country, and his creation of a dramaturgy in whose integral orchestra the varied offerings of Nigeria's heterogeneous society are time and again heard establish him as a Nigerian dramatist par excellence. (And this is in spite of his occasional exaltation of the Biafran cause.) In his final plays too, Irobi makes gestures towards a pan-Africanism that incorporates the African diaspora.

Irobi's concern with Europe becomes manifest only in the late play *Cemetery Road*, begun at the University of Nigeria and completed in the United Kingdom. The play is treated separately in the fourth chapter of this study as marking a crucial phase of transformation in his career, incorporating the themes and dramaturgy of the earlier plays and also mapping new areas of interest and development. That movement in many respects culminates in the highly subversive adaptation, *Sycorax*, in which his appropriation of the aesthetics of oral literature in adapting Shakespeare's *The Tempest* underscores even further the syncretic nature of his work as postcolonial drama. For his work illustrates a conscious attempt at the "combination and amalgamation of indigenous

performance forms within the framework of the Western notion of theatre. The process whereby culturally heterogeneous signs and codes are merged together [. . .]" (Balme 1). *Sycorax*, then, is the subject of the fifth chapter of this work and offers an occasion for appraising the phenomenon of African rewritings of canonical European plays. The sixth and final chapter integrates all Irobi's writing by examining the pivotal dance-drama structure of his work and explores in some detail his use of dance as a means of mediating and traversing different spheres of experience or even existence.

Work on Irobi's life and writing has only begun. His manuscripts are yet to be sorted out: at the time of his death, Irobi was working on the final version of a theoretical book project on indigenous theatre, *African Festival and Ritual Theatre: Resisting Globalization on the Continent and Diaspora since 1492*, but the manuscript of this potentially important work articulating in fascinating details Irobi's theory of performance still requires editing before its eventual publication. Further, a biography on Irobi has been commissioned since his death and a book of readings on African drama in which his own work is focal is being prepared in his honour. There are likewise several dissertations being written on his work, including a doctoral thesis at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The auguries are promising. Perhaps Irobi had the instinctive awareness that his work and life would attract attention. In an email written on 3 July 2008, Irobi gave me alternative titles for a book project on his drama: *The African Post-Colony in the Plays of Esiaba Irobi; Theatre, Tanks, and Teargas: Sex, Politics, and Violence in the Plays of Esiaba Irobi; Taking the Bull by the Balls: Sex, Politics, and Violence in the Plays of Esiaba Irobi*, etc. He suggested a publisher and even the appropriate number of pages! If this work helps to enhance the current interest in Irobi's writing and to provoke further debate on the aesthetic and ideological issues that he raises, it will have served its full purpose.

Chapter

1



Esiaba Irobi: The Igbo Worldview and Performative Heritage

Born on the day of Nigeria's independence from British colonisation, 1 October 1960 (a coincidence he appropriated in mythic terms to project his special incarnation of the national fate), Esiaba Akpara Irobi was the third child and first son in a family of eight. His father, Enoch Irobi, was a headmaster and his mother, Rosanna Irobi, a seamstress, oral poet, and raconteur. Irobi lost both parents in quick succession at the age of sixteen while a student at the Teacher Training College in Uzuakoli (near Umuahia), Abia State of Nigeria (1975-76). Educated also at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1979-83), the University of Sheffield (1989-90), and the University of Leeds (1991-97), both in England, his specialisation was in drama, film, and theatre studies. Theatre practitioner and scholar, Irobi at various times taught at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Liverpool John Moores University in England (1992-97), as well as at New York University (1997-2000), Towson University in Maryland (2000-02), and Ohio University in Athens, Ohio (2002-10), all in the United States of America. He was on a fellowship at the Free University of Berlin, Germany, at the time of his death. However, if Irobi's life was a

restless and audacious search for new horizons, his deep anchorage in the oral tradition of his Igbo ethnic group, its rituals of self-renewal, myths and legends of enigmatic and daring deity-heroes, its lore of the mysteries of life and transcendence of the human spirit, its rousing chants, masquerades, and dramaturgy remained his indispensable source of creative imagination and critical thinking. Upon his death on 3 May, 2010, contemporary African theatre lost a distinguished playwright, stage director, actor, poet, literary theorist, and scholar.

Irobi's account of his early life stresses the impact of his exposure to both Christianity and Western education, on the one hand, and traditional Igbo culture, on the other. As his father taught at a mission school, Irobi and his siblings were expected to incarnate Christian virtues and to embrace Western education with commensurate religious fervour. But Irobi was equally enraptured by the vigorous masquerade tradition of his father's people that had survived the onslaught of Christianity. Initiated into the Ekpe masquerade society as a child, he learnt to play masquerade music and partook in the incessant brawls that characterised the rivalry between masquerade groups; in that symbolic violence and in the occasional decapitation of sacrificial animals undertaken by the Ekpe society as part of propitiation rites and which are the epicentre of the Ekpe festival itself, he discovered the germ of the revolutionary instinct affirming the necessity of confrontation and even bloodletting in order to assert personal dignity and achieve communal regeneration.

From his mother and especially his Aunt Martha, Irobi mastered the art of storytelling and sundry performative skills. Irobi described his father's house as one built not with cement and mortar but with books and called his father a voracious reader. Irobi appraised very highly the three years (1976-79) he spent as a teacher at Girls' Secondary School, Akabo, Ikeduru in Imo State, and Boys' High School Mbawsi, in Abia State

before enrolling as a student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, because they had given him the opportunity for extensive reading that prepared him for a university education and his burgeoning writing career. But Irobi was certain of the greater value of his pupillage to indigenous performative artists, judging the relevance of his Western education as the gift of the intellectual audacity to question, challenge, and transform his Igbo cultural heritage; to regard that heritage as insufficient and so demanding of reinvention in order to become greater. (See “Eclipsed Visions”.)

How the impact of the intellectual ferment of Nsukka in the 1980s influenced Irobi’s judgment of indigenous Igbo literature and his conception of aesthetics can easily be discerned both in his creative writing and his scholarship. Irobi and his generation of students at Nsukka were taught by the likes of Chinua Achebe, Donatus Nwoga, Emmanuel Obiechina, Rev. Joseph Landy, Ossie Enekwe, Kalu Uka, and Emeka Nwabueze. (In the discipline of Fine Arts at the University was Obiora Udechukwu, in Music was Meki Nzewi, and in Political Science was Ikenna Nzimiro.) The postcolonial revalidation of African values that marked the early years of independence and was pivotal both in neo-African literature and in African literary scholarship remained in the ascendant at Nsukka and found an ardent disciple in Irobi. Reflecting on the roles of pioneer African writers towards the end of his life, Chinua Achebe in *There Was a Country* highlighted as pivotal the role of contesting negative representations of Africa and Africans in Western discourse and, moreover, of reinventing the continent: “[I]t was clear to many of us that an indigenous African literary renaissance was overdue. A major objective was to challenge stereotypes, myths, and the image of ourselves and our continent, and to recast them through stories—prose, poetry, essays, and books for our children. That was my overall goal” (53). Irobi described Achebe’s work as “richly theatrical” and found the position of Obiechina and Enekwe on the nature

of indigenous African performances instructive (even when his practice indicates an enlightened openness to diverse cultural backgrounds).

But it was the eminent scholar of indigenous African theatre James Amankulor who completely enthralled Irobi. Irobi documents how Amankulor, drawing inspiration from the theatrical traditions of his own community, the Umuode in Ngwaland, and the work of Achebe, Obiechina and Michael Echeruo at Nsukka earlier, had ventured into the field of indigenous African performances for his doctorate at UCLA in 1972. Returning to Nsukka in 1980 and designing a course titled "African Traditional Drama," Amankulor stunned Irobi and his peers by directing their gaze to a robust indigenous theatrical tradition that was yet to attract the scholarly attention it fully deserved and by enunciating an enabling poetics for the study of its dramaturgy. The saying among Irobi's generation of students was: "After Amankulor, no more Aristotle!"

Amankulor contended that while the dramatic art among the Igbo shares mimetic principles that are basically universal with the dramatic arts in other parts of the world, its performance conventions are nonetheless distinctive, as they relate specifically to Igbo culture: "Dramatic art in Igboland exists primarily within the context of festivals, the myths of which it concretizes. It is frequently used, like dance and music, to embellish such cultural festivals and ceremonies which may not have their own myths dramatized. Available research in Igboland reveals that dramatic art can hardly be said to exist outside of festivals and ceremonies" ("The Art of Dramatic Art" 400). This accounts for the integration of ritual and theatrical conventions, a practice virtually nonexistent in contemporary mainstream Western theatre, given the divestment of theatre from its ritual origins in the West. However, given that origin, Amankulor contends the inherent but relative interrelatedness in all cultures of theatre and ritual in its manifold

manifestations as sacred, ceremonial, routine, habit, practice. He notes divergent developments in Africa and the West arising from the interplay of sociocultural and economic conditions leading respectively to a rite-oriented and secular-oriented emphasis: “The intensification or reduction in the ceremonial ritual content of theatre portrays the extent to which that society or group integrates religion and social ethos or the extent to which such integration is diminished. Thus Western theatre has moved from a time when sacred ritual was integrated with secular ritual, such as during the Greek and Medieval times to a time when its primary concern is secular entertainment, and as a business or industry” (Amankulor, “The Condition” 52). He doubted that the dramatic art of indigenous oral traditions like that of the Igbo would evolve into the contemporary types of literary cultures but thought that it could renew itself and, moreover, yield new dramatic forms in the hands of an ingenious theatre reformer (Amankulor, “The Art of Dramatic Art” 411).

In 1982, Amankulor studied Odo performance among the Nsukka Igbo for *The Drama Review*. Without the usual formidable scholarly scaffolding and annotation to persuade a sceptical Western audience that Odo performance is theatre, the work explores the conflation of the theatrical, the religious, and mythical in a communal festival context. The drama of the return of the dead to their community lies partly in the willing suspension of disbelief that sustains the conventional use of humans as masked spirit-actors, the use of costume to delineate the characters, human and non-human, in the performance, the appropriation of music for both didactic goals and the enhancement of the aura of the supernatural, and the transformation of the reenactment of the mystery of birth and rebirth into an occasion for reaffirming communal ethos and values. But it was especially Amankulor’s examination of the Ekpe festival in Irobi’s own Ngwaland in 1981 that presented Irobi with even greater challenge and constituted a virtual

blueprint for his distinctive dramaturgy. Exalting the dramatic virtues of the Ekpe, Amankulor also noted its potentials susceptible to appropriation and transformation in the hands of a playwright knowledgeable of other dramatic cultures. Recalling how Amankulor had taught him and his peers both library research and fieldwork in African festival and theatre, Irobi noted: "The fieldwork changed my life. It gave me a new insight into what really constitutes effective theatrical performance: the power of indigenous choreography, live music, songs, masks, masquerades, a spiritual and transcendental approach to the craft of acting, directing and most importantly, playwriting" (*African Festival* 11-12). He traced to this insight his understanding of Soyinka's drama and his striving to seek in the Igbo tradition parallels to the Yoruba Ogun festivals central to Soyinka's work. Irobi found through this discovery the inspiration for a play like *The Colour of Rusting Gold* which he wrote while a student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Portraits of Irobi painted by close Nsukka associates strike sober people as paradoxically hyperbolic even when sincere. The Irobi of his peers at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was a veritable figure from mythology: archetypal artist and genius, eccentric and prodigy, lit from within by a mystical glow that his adoring friends and colleagues could only speculate on. With time, Irobi was to emerge as possibly the most talented and accomplished student writer on campus, publishing short stories but particularly renowned for his plays and poetry. He was equally peerless as an actor and stage director. An abiding presence in the Paul Robeson Drama Building, the Anthill (a cultural and poetry centre built at the outskirts of the university by Gbubemi Amas and Chinyere Mba-Uzoukwu for budding literary and performance artists and enthusiasts) and the Oak Theatre, the drama club of the university, Irobi was also a member of the Nsukka Conference of Creative Artists. For years, he took the annual departmental prizes for playwriting, poetry,

and short fiction.

But even at the outset of his career as a student at Nsukka, long before his prodigious talents became manifest and celebrated, his proclivity for the theatrical was obvious and his inexplicable charm infectious. Anyanwu, a classmate at Nsukka who thought Irobi rather enigmatic, traces his singleness of purpose right back to his first day at the university, recalls how his passion for creativity often meant he was too late for his meals, as he often reported late, and considers his apparent eccentricity a mark of his genius:

He studied, read and wrote everywhere – in the classroom, library, refectory, hostel and while walking. Even the din of the marketplace could not disrupt the flow of his creative thoughts. He wrote his poems and short stories everywhere. In the middle of his meal, Esiaba [Irobi] could quickly drop his cutlery, rifle his bag which was a moving library of sorts and brandish his jotter and pen and begin to write. You could see him at times stopping while walking to write down what the Muse had put in his head and then continue on his way. (n. pag.)

Irobi's soul mate and confidante to whom he dedicated his final poetry collection, *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin and Other Poems*, Georgina Alaukwu-Ehuriah, writes with deep conviction at his death:

Esiaba [Irobi] was possessed by his genius. He was driven and I saw him write for days in hidden corners of Paul Robeson Drama Building, totally oblivious of time, unkempt and without food. If he filled up his notes and books, he wrote on his palms and on his jeans trousers. I feared a lot for him then and to get him to shower and eat, you had to seize his writings and threaten to dump them inside water. I did a lot of those then, and when I found that his genius did not extend to the management of his pocket money, I became his pursuer. The story of the ingenuity I deployed to prevent Esiaba [Irobi] from channelling all his pocket money into the purchase of

foolscap sheets, biros and paying typists all over UNN is for another day. (17-18)

That Irobi was retained on graduation as a graduate assistant in his department was to his colleagues only an expected part of the Irobi legend.

But universal acclaim rarely rides hard on the heels of peer adulation. The magnificence of the student prodigy did not set the young faculty member on a steady course and may in fact have complicated the process of his settling in. Irobi's close friend and colleague, Olu Oguibe, points in the direction of the antagonism of a senior colleague who probably could stand neither Irobi's will to stardom and celebrity status nor his close relationship with another senior colleague and possible rival of his, Amankulor. In his 2007 interview with Leon Osu, Irobi broaches this matter and recalls how his antagonist had schemed to have him lose his job at the age of twenty-three, a scheme that failed because the then Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Edith Ihekweazu was against the position of that senior faculty member. Even though Irobi withholds the name of his adversary in the interview, he virtually identifies the person involved in observing that he had published an unsuccessful collection of poetry titled *Broken Pots*. In comparing that work with his own far better received though unpublished collection, *Handgrenades*, Irobi suggests rivalry as a possible cause of the acrimony. In 1977, Ossie Enekwe (1942-2010) had published a collection titled *Broken Pots* and, though Irobi had taken major roles between 1979 and 1981 in Enekwe's productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that toured the eastern states of Nigeria, first as Duncan and later as Macbeth, his relationship with Enekwe was known to have become strained.

Irobi's poetry of this period and of his exile is intensely autobiographical and dwells extensively on the general debilitating condition of a misdirected postcolony, and later the humiliations, ennui and adversities of exile. He speaks mysteriously of an enduring combat with the military rulers

of the country whom he had castigated relentlessly for years, inexorably approaching a deadly end. He is especially inconsolable at the dismal deterioration of infrastructure in the universities and the consequent emigration of Nigerian scholars and writers. In “Horizons! Horizons!,” one of the final poems in *Why I Don’t Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems* addressed to Georgina, Irobi’s anguish on his contemplation of the plight of the university derives partly from the disgrace of Nigerian academics courting the military for political positions: “The citadel was crumbling, and Georgie, it made me weep / to see the best minds of successive generations queue / in lines like flies for positions as commissioners, ministers / or ambassadors from the spiders of Dodan Barracks” (*Why* 92). He also appraises emigration as a moral defection and incorporates his own departure on a Commonwealth fellowship:

Or at the British High Commission, the United States Embassy, even the Malawi Embassy, to see my own professors, great intellectuals, lecturers, Vice Chancellors, penned like cattle to the slaughter in queues that reminded you of kwashiorkor clinics during the civil war. They stretched out, in thousands, in queues as long as our memory of soldiers in power, in the blazing sun, those I love and deeply respect, stretched out sniffing each other’s arses like copulating dogs, howling and baying for visas to escape like me to the brave new world. (*Why* 92)

But Irobi was wary of the seductions of the West: “the horizon, the infinite horizon, beckoning with its opening palms for an embrace, / the bitter bearhug of exile” (*Why* 94). He seemed aware that the flight to the West in search of a new lease of inspiration and a renewed impetus for life was ultimately no more than a heart-warming delusion.

And Irobi fared poorly in exile. He thought his English hosts rather philistine and called them “dumb parrots and ostriches

of literature,” “the vultures and vampires of literature written in English” (*Why* 96) who were incapable of appreciating his value, “an African diamond in an English shithole / illuminating like a circus bear the wounds and sores of exile” (*Why* 98). He especially found colleagues in Liverpool uncooperative and was sensitive to conversations that died in mid-sentence as he approached. He told friends in utter anguish of colleagues retreating into their offices at lunch break on seeing him at the vending machine when it was obvious they too had meant to buy a drink. For one who craved attention and sought the opportunity to stage his knowledge, his situation was untenable. He understandably likened the place to Dante’s hell and marvelled at the resilience of his mind to the sustained psychological torment that was his lot. Liverpool was emblematic of a general malaise he associated with the British:

And I ask again: Was Carthage this base? Was Rome this crass and vulgar when it was ransacked by Alaric the Visigoth? Was it always like this in Treasure Island? Is there a more aspiritual race on the surface of this earth? Georgie, the English are such a secular tribe that they Had to invent cricket to remind them of eternity. (*Why* 96)

Typically, Irobi’s reading of the history of imperial Britain in Nigeria embittered him and necessarily impinges on his assessment of the country and her people. But England had also failed to warm up to Irobi as Nsukka had done earlier on and he was deeply hurt. The apparent conspiracy of mainstream British publishing houses bruised the self-esteem of a young writer anxious to consolidate his self-image and authenticate peer adoration. If indeed Irobi’s poetry is his final testament, then, his denunciation of the British is absolute. In his later drama also, his portraits of Europeans are consistently unflattering and his abjuration of Europhilism as the monolithic European tradition is relentless.

Irobi's picture as sketched by colleagues in the West contests the image of the adored Nsukka idol. Generally recognised as knowledgeable and talented, he was considered an exhibitionist and his craving for adulation was thought practically insatiable. Irobi was believed to stop at nothing to draw attention to himself as exemplified by his incredible habit of taking several books or putting on a torn T-shirt to wear to parties. He had a compulsion to be different and to be the focal point of attention. Self-confident almost to a point of self-canonisation, Irobi was seen as self-infatuated in spite of himself in his usual expectation that colleagues defer to his judgment and tastes or be considered intellectual minnows. His characteristic attribution of even uncompleted manuscripts only to high-ranking publishing houses or journals may well confirm his robust self-esteem. He seemed constantly under enormous pressure to distinguish himself and often seemed to forget what he had already accomplished. Impatient even of genuine criticism which he frequently regarded as disguised competitiveness, his deliberate provocation of outrage was often seen as the compulsion of a consummate self-publicist preferring notoriety to being ignored. Whatever his motivations, Irobi's relentless public vilification first of the British and later of Americans when he relocated to the United States as shallow and racist, while certainly not original, cost him much, obviously because he seemed to derive some pleasure from gloating over those he appeared happy to wound. He invariably provoked speculations of reverse racism.

Kind, humorous, even vulgar on occasions, gifted in making friends and with a certain talent for setting a forest of words ablaze and for getting an audience on its feet, Irobi typically was an instant hit on arrival in most of the universities where he taught. Students loved his firebrand ideological postulations and penchant for theatricality. At Ohio University, one of Irobi's students, Jeff Rosenberg, made an award-winning film titled "Relative Obscurity" in which Irobi played himself, with

Rosenberg insisting during production on Irobi who had been diffident at the outset playing his usual theatrical and fiery self in class. Irobi, however, invariably seemed to estrange himself soon enough from most colleagues who were put off by both his will to be recognised as the star scholar and to put white people in their proper place. Most students too eventually tended to think him just too bitter or angry at everything and everyone, including himself. At conferences in the UK and the US, Irobi solidified his reputation for what he called “demolishing white audiences” and on one occasion at the Institute of Education, University of London, had his video tape confiscated after a presentation while a disciplinary procedure was evoked against the senior staff member of the institute who had invited him to the conference. His battle for a tenure-track position across two continents, grim and protracted in spite of his considerable body of distinguished work and experience earned in three continents but, eventually resolved at Ohio University, partly because of the university's reluctance to be dragged through the legal mud, tells the story of how Irobi's Western peers judged him and his work.

While Irobi might have exacerbated the racism over which he agonised unduly, the consequence of that fixation as well as the impact of his anguished struggles on his career and life was enormous. Olu Oguibe notes that though only in his mid-thirties when he relocated to New York in 1997 after his experience in Liverpool, Irobi was already battling chronic blood pressure problems, was on constant medication, and required exercise and diet regimens. He seemed resolved not to begin a family till he had a secure teaching position. But for one who often lacked the practical skills of homekeeping and flourished under the influence of a surrogate mother, that decision meant that he forwent the emotional stability of a loving home as well as its occasionally relieving distractions. Irobi transformed even his house into a library where his feverish work, like his tortured desperation to break through

and achieve distinction, was unrelenting. Irobi wrote some haunting poetry, completed some drama manuscripts, some of which obviously go back to his Nsukka days, and published some articles. But he seemed to have had no luck with his book manuscripts. He talked so much more about writing than he actually wrote.

In his sombre appraisal of the significance of Irobi's life, career, and death, Oguike highlights the circumstances that inhibited Irobi's precocious talents from coming into full blossom. Oguike's elegy is compelling of course because his portrait of the young man as a genius exploits all the canonical elements of the Irobi lore: erudition, audacity, indefatigability, eccentricity, adored personality, his role as director, teacher, actor, orator, and source of inspiration, seemingly unassailable even by the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. Oguike's rapturous recollection of Irobi in the role of Elesin in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* evokes otherworldly enchantment:

In his role as the calvary (sic) leader, Esiaba Irobi put in one of the most memorable performances ever seen on stage. From the proud and rumbustious royal cavalier to the flirtatious and colourful groom on his wedding night, Irobi was nothing but spellbinding. But theatre became life became sacred rite when he stepped into the cavalier's final preparations before death. With throbbing music and elegiac praise-singers egging him on, he became transcendent, like a great masquerade, ritual in slow motion, every step and every gesture testifying to the unimaginable burden of a man who must die to please his king and save his people and their universe. As the sweat poured from his brow each night, and hearts thumped all around to the relentless drums, every sinew in his body bore that testament, heroic and monumental, in silence greater than silence itself, spirit already severed from the albatross of flesh. Most had never seen theatre quite as electric and probably never would again. Earlier acquaintance[s] had seen Irobi in Shakespearian

roles, but those who also saw him in the role of Elesin Oba attest that nothing else could compare. (n. pag.)

Oguibe's contention is that the experience of exile ruined Irobi's art and life and that we must return to his awesome accomplishments at Nsukka as a young man in his late twenties to see his best work. Irobi clearly failed to find in the West the enabling space he desperately sought for meditating on the Muse and giving a voice to her mysterious soliciting. The dialectic between culpability and fate in that failure will remain central in appraisals of Irobi's tragedy, as the sunrise of Nsukka will remain the eternal paradigm against which Irobi's biographers must measure his fading glow and sunset in the West.

In a tribute read at Irobi's graveside at Amapu Igbengwo Umuakpara Osisioma Ngwa in Abia State, Nigeria, on 16 July, 2010, his friend and colleague, the veteran stage director, Eni-Jones Umuko, called Irobi the most vociferous personality of his generation in the theatre. He also identified Irobi as "a very consummate actor who acted very passionately with a Stanislavskian emotional intensity that he holds under very tight control with a Brechtian discipline" and noted how that gave him "the persona of a Grotowskian mask." All these traits, in Umuko's estimation, made his acting assume a trance-like quality (12). Umuko had directed the production of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* in which Irobi had memorably played the role of Elesin, and, predictably, that role was the focus of Umuko's reminiscences. He described Irobi in that role as so "incredibly believable" and "effervescent" that he always had a hypnotic effect on the spectators, and recalled that Irobi's "enunciation was articulate and his modulation very elucidatory, helping to achieve what he lewdly labelled 'clitoral ecstasy in speech'" (13). In his role as Styles in Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* in a production of the play directed by James Amankulor, Irobi, as Umuko recalled, was equally

compelling: “Despite the paucity in the number of actors on stage, Esiaba [Irobi] played Styles with such *élan* and panache; re-enacting the numerous roles within the roles of Styles with so much exuberance that the spectators always marvelled and saw more than just three actors on stage during performance” (13).

Deeply moving and explicitly panegyric as most graveside tributes strive to be, Umuko’s oration in describing Irobi’s acting generally as “trance-like” and his role as Elesin specifically in terms of its “hypnotic” effect on the spectators nonetheless offers a sober and critically insightful assessment consistent with Irobi’s own account of his interpretation of that role. For Irobi himself was certain that the role of Elesin which he played first as a final-year student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1983 and then several times more between 1985 and 1989 was clearly the most “satisfying role” he played on stage, comparable only to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which he had played as a second-year student in the university. But he thought Elesin a greater role

[. . .] because of its multidisciplinary demands on the actor. You have to dance, sing, chant, mime, tell a story in the traditional African sense, play musical instruments, act, have sexual intercourse with the young bride in scene three, fondle the breasts of market women in scene one, enter into sacred/occult moments as well as secular ones in the play. You continuously oscillate from deep tragic moods to exhilarating high comic feelings in a matter of seconds while on stage. It is an awesome role, the most transcendent and spiritual and phenomenological—not merely cerebral—that I have ever played. It is arguably the most challenging role in modern world drama.¹

Irobi further exalted the role as typifying “indigenous African initiatory and mythopoeic acting styles,” which he considered superior to Stanislavski’s “magic if.” He traced to that role insights that eventually led to his own development of a theory

of African performance with “entrancement” or “possession” as a distinctive feature and a basic canon of his own practice not only as actor but also as stage director producing numerous plays, including his own in Nigeria, Ireland, Hungary, the USA, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, England, Portugal, and Scotland.

Irobi's articulation of an African/African diasporic aesthetic theory in his essays “The Theory of Ase: the Persistence of African Performance Aesthetics in the North American Diaspora” and “Taking the Bull by the Horns: On the Oriki Theory of African and African Diasporic Orature” covers basically the same ground, though the latter strives towards greater comprehensiveness in scope where the former illustrates its insights primarily with the drama of August Wilson, Ntozake Shange, and Djanet Sears. Irobi's acknowledged basic inspiration in his enunciation of an African/African diasporic theory in the latter essay is Henry Louis Gates's challenge to black scholars to recognise their dual patrimony as heirs not only to critical theory but also to the black vernacular tradition, and thus to appreciate the necessity to define theory from within black culture. Irobi then proceeds to recognise the existence of a “body of performance theories that are African in conception and expression which have been excluded from contemporary intellectual discourse by both African and Western scholars because of the dominance of typography and European languages as the primary media of instruction, scholarship and validation in the Western academy” (“Taking” 174). Contending that theory does not have to be expressed only typographically, Irobi notes its articulation in non-Western cultures in other forms of signification such as “orature, dance, theatre, music, festival, ritual, carnival performance, video and film” (“Taking” 178). He also discerns the articulation of theory in the metalanguages and metanarratives that he argues constitute “the primary polysemic infrastructure for encoding and transmitting history,

performance traditions, identity, critical/theoretical discourses about art among most non-Western cultures and civilizations of the world" ("Taking" 179). Irobi discerns in the sculptures, choreography, drum languages, oral poetry, and masquerade forms of non-Western cultures the inscriptions of the people's myths, worldviews, values, and ontological concepts that account for the structures and dynamics of their other art-forms, such as theatrical performances. Irobi concludes: "These metalingual constructs, as performance texts, contain within their complex configurations theoretical concepts and discourses about history, politics, identity and race that predate the colonial moment" ("Taking" 180).

Irobi justifies his attention to the 'oriki', a ceremonial salutation among the Yoruba in which the sterling accomplishments, titles, and personal distinctions of an individual and his/her lineage are chanted to the accompaniment of drumming and dancing. He identifies it as paradigmatic of African praise poetry and as a distinctively African mode of the poetic, the mythic, and the religious ("Taking" 195). In appropriating the "oriki" performed oral poetry as the pivot of a theory on *theatrical* aesthetics, Irobi approaches the 'oriki' primarily as "an oral, embodied and performative construct as well as an instance of enactment, re-enactment, spirituality and community" ("Taking" 182). Irobi's own postulations and the authorities he invokes clearly invest in "entrancement" an intensity of sensitivity and perceptiveness that grants the possessed access to powers and insights ordinarily beyond the human. The paradigm, no doubt, is the "oriki" chanter's experience of ritual transformation at the presence of invoked deities. But Irobi also thought that the "oriki" in its humanistic exaltation of human perfection and accomplishments and in its virtual recreation of the human image as divine by its indulgence in superlatives enhanced that transition. In the Praise Singer's apocalyptic projections into the mind of the silent and entranced Elesin at the moment of

transition in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Irobi discerns a visionary appropriation of the powers of the "oriki":

By deploying the oriki as an enabling text which opens the door for the conflation of oral poetry, incantation, chant, spoken word, music, dance, enactment, community, audience engineering, into a synesthetic experience, the Praise Singer dynamically awakens in the community their age-old communal acting technique of using "possession" as an aesthetic for ecstasy, becoming, divinization, transformation and revelation, through which he, the Praise Singer, is actually transformed, as an actant, *not just an actor*, into the consciousness of the supposedly dead Elesin Oba. Through a pre-emptive albeit prophylactic and oracular use of the oriki text, the Praise Singer is thus able to communicate to the audience and theatrical community, the fears, anxieties, doubts, and regenerative vision the Elesin Oba has for his community in his absence as Western modernity marches in and begins to trample and erase this pre-modern acting aesthetic or technique. ("Taking" 201)

Irobi's call for a potential proliferation of theories that foreground the "self-sufficiency" and "distinctiveness" of different subcultures as a resolution to the homogenising tendencies of postcolonialism apparently underestimates the impact of hybridity that he repeatedly invokes; it equally underestimates the need for a theory comprehensive enough to illuminate historically related situations of oppression and resistance. However, Irobi's basic assumption is possibly unassailable: African art forms could hardly have reached their significant levels of advancement and sophistication without the existence of a body of guiding aesthetic principles that regulated the practicing artists' education and self-criticism as well as societal approval and censure. Equally, his signal insight of the necessity to recognise peculiarities in deploying so totalising a rubric as postcolonialism is at the core of an ongoing revaluation of postcolonial theory and draws on a

strong tradition of African scepticism about the theory.

The Nigerian poet and scholar Niyi Osundare cautions that names are a fundamental part of the politics of representation in contemporary literary discourse and worries about the Western origin of “postcolonial” as a term to describe the African situation and literature:

“[P]ost-colonial” is not just another literary-critical construct to be used with the same terminological certitude and blissful complacency with which we employ its counterparts such as “poststructural” and “postmodernist.” More than other terminologies of the “post-” variety, “post-colonial” is a highly sensitive historical, and geographical, trope which calls to significant attention a whole epoch in the relationship between the West and the developing world, an epoch which played a vital role in the institutionalization and strengthening of the metrople-periphery, centre-margin dichotomy. We are talking about a trope which brings memories of gunboats and mortars, conquests and dominations, a trope whose accent is blood-stained. We are talking about a terminology whose name and meaning are fraught with the burdens of history and the anxieties of contemporary reality. (205)

Osundare notes the denotative and descriptive inadequacy of the term and considers its insufficient discrimination of types of coloniality an approach “tantamount to mocking the real wounds of the colonial infliction where they are deepest and most enduring” (207).

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, whose work on postcolonial drama Irobi cites approvingly, write about postcolonialism:

Not a naïve teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, postcolonialism is, rather, an engagement with and contestation of colonialism’s discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies. Colonisation is insidious: it invades far more than political chambers and extends well beyond

independence celebrations. Its effects shape language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities, and, increasingly, popular culture. (2)

However, the Nigerian playwright, poet and scholar Femi Osofisan sternly counters the consequent reductive assumption deriving from that definition: that African writing continues to privilege Europe as the "Centre" and focal point of African resistance, rather than being read as "attempts to confront, through our plays, our novels and poetry, the various problems of underdevelopment which our countries are facing, and of which the threat of alienation and the potential erosion of ethnic identity constitute *only one* of the outward signals" (3). Osofisan admits that the old colonial wound still rankles, but privileges African writers' primary concern not with the scars of colonisation but instead with the roles of inept African leadership and a complacent populace in the continuing impoverishment of the continent. Osofisan concedes some common features with the goals of postcolonialism and even acknowledges that African writers' achievements are partly dependent on Africa's contact with the rest of the world; but he considers the distinctions crucial.²

Gilbert and Tompkins recognise postcolonialism's habitual failure to emphasise diversity and heterogeneity and indeed claim: "Critiques of post-colonialism are frequently responses to arguments based primarily on attempts to homogenize texts, histories, and cultures" (4). Citing Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin to note that while "difference" in colonialist discourse marks subordination, in postcolonial analysis it marks identity, they conclude: "A theory of post-colonialism that fails to recognize this distinction between 'differences' will recreate the spurious hierarchies, misreadings, silencings, and a historicisms that are part of the imperial enterprise" (4).

However, Gilbert's attention to correspondences in the postcolonies is equally keen as she identifies in nations formerly colonised by Western imperial powers the development of

drama that “exhibits a strong urge to recuperate local histories and local performance traditions, not only as a means of cultural decolonisation but also as a challenge to the implicit representational biases of Western theatre” (*Postcolonial Plays* 1). Highlighting cultural practices with both a historical and discursive relationship to Western imperialism, and generally illuminating any kind of resistance against class, race, and gender oppression, such drama, Gilbert contends, is “currently a major force reshaping the ways in which we can think of performance as social praxis” (*Postcolonial Plays* 6). Like Irobi, she notes deviations from narrow conceptions of dialogue-dependent performance and stresses varying forms of local articulation such as storytelling, folk forms, and ritualised enactments (4). Irobi concurs in privileging the oral and performative roots of African and African diasporic drama in ritual: “Concepts and notions of creativity and performance, ritual and festive models were translocated to the new world during slavery and these elements helped our people to negotiate new identities and create new syncretic cultures. We see some of these elements of African orality in the work of Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, the music of blues and jazz musicians and most vividly in the African-American gospel music and worshipping style—a direct echo of our indigenous ritual performance, invocations, chants, ululations, yodelings, etc” (“My E-conversation” 49).

In his article “The Theory of *Ase*,” Irobi emphasises the *embodiment* of theory in non-Western cultures as a crucial component of the “notion of theatrical experience as a transcendent experience whose texts are inscribed, incubated, performed, and translocated by the human body” as opposed to “the prevalent European diasporic episteme of the theatre as a cultural/artistic activity driven by a literary text or dramatic literature” (16). Speaking of pivotal roles of the body in African performances, he says:

[C]ultures of the African diaspora understand and

acknowledge that the human body is somatogenic. It has its own memory and an intrinsically wired phenomenological “software” for encoding and decoding historical, artistic, and performative information meant for enactment and remembrance. In the sensibility or imaginary of most African and African diasporic cultures of orature, the human body is a site of discourse, the slate on which are written the most precious aspects of the narratives of life through a complex network of sonic, proxemic, tactile, iconographic, olfactory, kinaesthetic literacies and other forms of subversive intelligence. Theatre for these African diasporic non-Western educated communities consists of performance texts instead of literary texts. (16)

Irobi's approving citation of Gilbert and Tompkins's conception of the “ritual body” and its potentials in his later essay on the “oriki theory” is thus clearly understandable when he highlights the model ritual transformation undergone by the performer of the “oriki” at the invocation of deities: “In its ability to traverse the human/spirit divide, the ritual body confounds the rational processes of imperial discourse and thus refuses capture and containment. Ritual renders the body open and mutable while requiring or producing highly formalised actions, such as dance or processional movement, which display the ritual force as energy in action” (Gilbert and Tompkins 62).

But Irobi was aware of inhibitions and of the necessity to accept to participate in challenging negotiations. He called himself “a scholar working *within* and *against* the hegemonic intellectual and theoretical orthodoxies of the Western academy in the twenty-first century” (“Taking” 198) and acknowledged that the indigenous theories he canvassed “have been hybridized both on the continent and diaspora due to a European-enforced modernity or naturally creolized in the New World as a result of circum-Atlantic slavery and other transnational migrations” (“Taking” 174). In “The Theory of Ase,” he similarly notes that African “performance texts are unavoidably syncretized by the performer's experiences of colonialism and slavery” and

underscores the necessity to resist, not hybridity, but “total westernization or Europeanization as intended by the slave masters and colonizers” (16). Irobi then recognises his “African” aesthetic theory as “transnational, international, syncretizing, non-essentialist and migratory” (“Taking” 181). He argues with consummate passion for an African name for it, since the process of “naming theories in African languages will prove that we have theories of our own performances and had them before the arrival of the Europeans with their languages” (“Theory of Ase” 20). However, by canonising the mere process of naming as the irrefragable marker of African identity while conducting the crucial business of theorisation and creating works of art in a European language, Irobi seems to take for granted analogies between cultures and languages which his theory explicitly denies. Moreover, his own African-naming often challenges logic, unless his logic is that there is no need for any logic in the invocation of the icons of a civilisation to denote just anything in that civilisation! In negotiating the transition from a distinctive African identity to an enlightened partaker of a possible human patrimony, and from orature to literature, Irobi found a peerless guide in Wole Soyinka.

Soyinka had been vociferous in his condemnation of the West for its expectation that Africa accept its theoretical paradigms as universal: “We Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonialism—this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems” (*Myth* x). Soyinka’s recognition of the centrality of cultural, historical, and even individual imperatives is a key motivating factor in his enunciation of a tragic vision derived primarily from his interpretation of the mysteries of the Yoruba deity, Ogun.

Noting the inadequacy of general aesthetic theories to explain satisfactorily certain areas of depth-experience such

as the tragic, Soyinka contends that tragedy is fundamental in the eternal effort to understand the human paradox. Writing from a Yoruba perspective, Soyinka accounts for tragedy basically in terms of the pains and glory of the pilgrimage through the abyss of dissolution in a striving towards a reintegration of self with essence. However, by repeatedly summoning Hellenistic tragic paradigms and Nietzsche's ideas, Soyinka apparently valorises them as points of departure and as classical models against which he must measure his revelations. In his recognition of the purgation of the hero's ego through suffering as a basic tragic delight, as well as the hero's unusually enhanced powers of spiritual perception, Soyinka attempts to establish the truly universal character of tragedy:

Suffering cancels the opaque pleasure of human existence: suffering, the truly overwhelming suffering of Sango, of Lear, of Oedipus, this suffering hones the psyche to a finely self-annihilating perceptiveness and renders further action futile and above all, lacking in dignity. And what has the struggle of the tragic hero been, after all, but an effort to maintain that innate concept of dignity which impels to action only to that degree in which the hero possesses a true nobility of spirit? At such moments he is close to the acceptance and wisdom of Obatala in which faith is rested, not on the self, but on a universal selfhood to which individual contributions are fundamentally meaningless. (*Myth* 134)

In reality, then, Soyinka does not quite repudiate the idea of universal paradigms (to which individual contributions are meaningless) as the idea of European hegemony inherent in its closely guarded idea of a universalist concept of tragedy and of an essential human nature. He summons European models—but only to subvert them. Soyinka writes that: “the function and nature of music in Yoruba tragedy is peculiarly revealing of the shortcomings of long accepted conclusions of European intuition” (*Myth* 147). After some initial precaution

taken to acknowledge his theory as specifically Yoruba, Soyinka's assertions increasingly become all-embracing: "Tragic music is [. . .]" (145); "Tragic fate is [. . .]" (156); "Powerful tragic drama follows [. . .]" (156). Of course, Soyinka's ambition is to displace European tragic paradigms by his post-colonial model. Ogun is Dionysos, Apollo, and Prometheus all in one. To this unapologetic exaltation of Ogun may well be traced the vital source of the inspiration and model firing the zeal of generations of African writers to search the African pantheon, myths, and legends for deity-heroes capable of stimulating the creative imagination and dramatic action or of illuminating the human situation.

Yet, as Tejula Olaniyan has noted, "Soyinka's theory of African tragedy, 'The Fourth Stage,' is inconceivable as it is without Nietzsche and ancient Greek mythology" (5). The central myth of Atunda fragmenting the unified essence, the Original One, which necessitates Ogun's plunge into transitional ether to retrieve a fullness of being, is a variation on the Greek myth of love and the compulsion for reunion and completeness. Soyinka himself acknowledges the necessary complementarity of all human cultures:

Nothing in these essays [that make up *Myth, Literature and the African World*] suggests a detailed uniqueness of the African world. Man exists, however, in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other 'world' is unique. It possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent. (xii)

Soyinka's theatre is a consummate synthesis of indigenous Yoruba theatre and the European heritage. Guided by Soyinka's example, Irobi explores his own Igbo cultural background in the light of the other theatrical and mythic traditions, African

and European, for enabling myths and artistic forms to regenerate a moribund postcolony. His appropriation of the aesthetics of oral literature in his reworking of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as *Sycorax* highlights even further the representative syncretic nature of Irobi's work as postcolonial drama.

Ben Obumsele's 1966 article "The Background of Modern African Literature" was a pioneering effort in Nigerian scholarship in its serious appraisal of the relevance of the indigenous artistic heritage to the postcolonial African writer. The thesis is a signal insight of Obumsele's scholarship: the indispensable hybridity of all human cultures and every writer's responsibility to appropriate the human patrimony and subject it to an original and life-enhancing synthesis in the bid to illuminate and enhance the human scope. While Obumsele's appraisal of some genres of the indigenous literature is unflattering, he recognises nonetheless the existence of a considerable corpus of myths and legends that could be adapted and re-interpreted in the context of contemporary African experience. He comments that "like the mythologies on which the Greeks and the Irish based their national literatures, these stories are rich and suggestive *without being so rigidly intellectualized that they cannot bear reinterpretation in changed circumstances*" (273; emphasis added). Obumsele's specific illustration reinforces the insight that it is the malleability of a narrative or act, not its sacred iconicity, which makes it available to the artist as creative material; that too is the quality that accounts for its timelessness, as it is thus endowed with the potential to elicit original insights from the talented writer:

In general, legend, myth and ritual have been far more fruitful in the development of world literature than folklore. For more than twenty centuries, Greek legends have been the soil out of which new literary invention has sprung. Around the figure of Orestes alone have developed a long line of tragedies starting from Aeschylus down to the revenge

tragedies of the Renaissance and Voltaire's *Oreste*. With Frazer's anthropology of religion in the twentieth century, Orestes has become associated with both the sacrificial victim and the saviour. In a recent interpretation of the legend Sartre (*Les Mouches*) has exploited its political aspect, dramatizing through it the guilty prostration of France under German occupation. (56)

M.J.C. Echeruo's seminal and sober assessment of Igbo ritual came to a similar conclusion.

Noting the dramatic potentials of Igbo ritual in 1971 in his presentation titled "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual" at a seminar on Igbo Studies at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, Echeruo contended that those potentials were severely inhibited by the liturgical form of ritual, as ritual is "a representation in action of a faith or a dream, like communion or baptism" (138). Seeing the satisfactory transformation of ritual into a celebration and the conversion of the mythic structure of action from the religious and priestly to the secular as a basic condition for drama to flourish, Echeruo discerned in the evolution of Greek drama a paradigm for the Igbo to emulate: "What is needed then, it seems to me, is to force that ritual to yield its story; to cut through the overlay of ceremony to the primary events of the *mythos*. Ritual is, and has always been, a dead end, it cannot grow. It only shrinks steadily into inevitably inaccessible (though powerful) symbolism. The Igbo should do what the Greeks did: expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base" (147).

In their separate interrogations of Echeruo's argument and basic assumptions years later, two other Igbo scholars, Emmanuel Obiechina and Ossie Enekwe, extended the debate on the nature of Igbo theatre. Contending that Africa had a culture and a history different from the Greeks, Obiechina refutes as illogical the consideration of the Greek paradigm as a universal model. His submission is that Igbo/African ritual festivals are in no further need of evolution, being already

authentic drama, though understandably different from classical Greek drama. Interrogating the assumption that the conventions of the European theatre are universally applicable, he underscores the distinctive virtues of indigenous African festivals in terms of the longer duration of enactments, the broader and more communal arena of performance, and a greater proclivity for more diffused ritual and symbolic significance of action (300).

For his part, Enekwe argues, against Echeruo's opinion, saying that drama does not even have to evolve from myth, since history or any other form of activity could equally offer material and structure for drama (158). As theatre is anchored in impersonation and interactivity, myth can only play a subordinate role there and the elements of myth when found in drama function in social restructuring, in other words, in establishing an ideological position (Enekwe 150). Arguing that function determines the nature of drama in every culture, Enekwe notes that poetry was central to the drama of 5th century BC Greece because the society held poetry in high regard, just as the emphasis on moral rhetoric in Greek tragedy meant that the order of events should reflect the moral order (152). On the other hand, given its importance in Africa, ritual is an integral part of the African theatre, which is participative and celebrative. Indigenous African theatre is equally total, as it combines many art forms, such as music, poetry, dance, acting, miming, mask, painting, singing, dialogue; speech, however, is not dominant as in the mainstream European theatre (Enekwe 154).

Nevertheless, insightful as Obiechina and Enekwe's observations are about the structure and nature of indigenous African performances, their work emphasises the critical need for scholarly discrimination in performance forms and performance intentions, from the merely dramatic to drama, and from the primarily ritualistic or religious to the aesthetic. In an article published in the same year as Enekwe's, 1981,

Amankulor remarks on the integration in traditional African drama of diverse and complex arts forms such as masks, body costumes and decorations, music, song, and dance. He reemphasises the practice of traditional drama primarily in the context of festivals but underscores its distinctive virtue as the representation of action through the mimetic principle. Amankulor's conclusion is instructive: "[T]here is no doubt that drama in traditional African societies is often characterised by much exterior factors such as ritual, religion, ceremony, and the quest for means of livelihood but these exterior influences cannot in themselves be called drama. These authenticate the core action presented as the drama and give it its unique colour" ("The Art of Drama" 36). Neither Obiechina nor Enekwe is inclined to such rigour.

Moreover, neither Obiechina nor Enekwe seriously engages with the changing roles of African literature in the modern world and therefore the indispensable question of the afterlife of indigenous literary as well as theatrical forms and their use in contemporary African literature. The formation of new heterogeneous communities and political alliances, the espousal of new belief systems and articulation of new philosophies and ways of life, the necessarily greater investment of political consciousness in the postcolonial state interrogate the communal celebratory reenactment of the shared values of a cohesive community and so can remain pivotal only through new inventions and adaptations. Recent scholarship on indigenous African performances understandably establishes adaptation and change as a basic survival strategy and inevitable consequence of culture contacts and equally strives to de-emphasise the clean distinction between ritual and theatre that the Western tradition entrenched. Christopher Balme contends that rather than being mutually exclusive in phenomenological terms, ritual and theatre can be located on a performative continuum to foreground corresponding elements or areas of distinction. Balme believes that the

numerous experiments with ritual by postcolonial writers warrant the consideration of the notion of performance as a unifying concept that emphasises interaction rather than exclusion (67; see also Okagbue). Nonetheless, the expropriation of ritual forms in the theatre (which Balme cites Goffman to identify as the transgression and application of the conventions governing one kind of frame to another) belongs in theatrical experimentation made possible in the first instance by the approach to ritual with the suspension of disbelief rather than faith. As Irobi's response to this debate as a playwright indicates, postcolonial playwrights hardly needed to restate the sacramental purity or efficacy of ritual but to transpose ritual, to break down its liturgical framework, to redefine the sacred in secular terms in their ontologically different theatres with an eye on contemporary African circumstances and needs. The daunting challenge is one of appropriation, adaptation, and reinvention of indigenous performance models.

Preoccupied with the frustration and dispossession of the Nigerian youth by the country's leadership, military and civilian alike, and by the passionate espousal of a violent ethic as a resolution to the corruption of Nigerian politics, Irobi's drama explores this political theme against the backdrop of a ritual symbolism that evokes the atmosphere of much of Soyinka's drama. Seeking in his own Igbo cultural background enabling myths to comprehend society as well as life's abiding mysteries, Irobi's work not only indicates his appropriations of Soyinka's insights in stagecraft but also his subjection of his material to a demonstrably Soyinkan interpretation. Fascinated by Ogun's revolutionary attributes, Irobi, perhaps understandably, is drawn to the myth of the Igbo god of thunder, lightning, and justice, Amadioha, whom he often recreates partly in the image of Ogun. (Soyinka's own recreation of Ogun is itself exemplary mythmaking! See Barnes.) Moreover, for an artist like Irobi devoted to the ritual purgation and re-creation of society,

Amadioha's spectacular cleansing flames prove equally irresistible as subject to possible ideological invocation. The allusion to Echeruo is explicit when in his 2007 interview Irobi appraises the significance of his use of ritual in *Nwokedi* saying it "was aesthetically a breakthrough. We finally saw how indigenous ritual aesthetics could be used as aesthetic infrastructure for modernist politics. That's what *Nwokedi* represents—the metamorphosis of what is considered ritual into an infrastructure for political discourse; what is considered fixed and sterile now found useful for political discourse, for dialogue in democracy."³ Irobi's actual practice, though, like Echeruo's later writing complicates the matter. His drama stages the playwright's apprehension in approaching the theatrical limit of ritual and acknowledgment of a sacred core that compels faith, not experimental aesthetic scepticism.⁴ Soyinka, whose drama is exemplary in transposing ritual into theatrical frameworks, concedes the necessarily problematic relationship between the two modes that share an ancient kinship:

The essential problem is that the emotive progression which leads to a communal ecstasy or catharsis has been destroyed in the process of restaging. So this leads us intentionally to the perennial question of whether ritual can be called drama, at what moment a religious or mythic celebration can be considered transformed into drama, and whether the ultimate test of these questions does not lie in their capacity to transfer from habitual to alien environments. (*Myth 5*)

Gilbert and Tompkins cite Kacke Götrick to argue that while Western drama is essentially based on the principles of Aristotelian mimesis, the African is not (56). Remarking on the ritual imperative at the core of Götrick's argument, Irobi himself notes her observation of enactments in Africa that are simultaneously presentational and representational, real and fictitious; he identifies this as a "holistic definition of theatre as a mythopoeic, aesthetic, ritual, political, spiritual,

communal, participatory, and regenerative experience" ("Theory of Ase" 16).

In a more detailed consideration of the subject, noting that the "concept of Aristotelian mimesis is not only not a condition of all art, but is a feature of a particular and historically specific realization of it," Echeruo censures the myth-ritual theorists for their attempt to explain non-European art with the tropes of evolutionary rhetoric and identifies the African festival as non-mimetic "art that does not seek to imitate a *mythos*, but to express its *dianoia*" ("Redefining" 138). Echeruo's classic African festival is the Igbo Ojiyi festival of the Nsukka people that commemorates their initial rejection and final acceptance of Ojiyi as the deity of Aku, and his examination of the Ojiyi myth yields a story built around the four manifestations of the god to the people, their initial rejection of him, his own angry rejection of their ritual offerings, his persistence and eventual acceptance, marked with dance and celebration. Echeruo notes in the Ojiyi festival as in other Igbo ritual- and rite-based performances and celebrations "the explicit denial of narrative mimesis; that is, the refusal to be drawn into what may be called the selective elaboration, re-enactment and reinterpretation of the significant aspects of the festival myth that is one definition of drama in the Western mimetic tradition" (144). In an earlier study, "Mimesis and Dianoia in Igbo Folk Festivals," Echeruo acknowledges that the suppression of the myth in the Igbo folk festival is indeed deliberate and functional even if it limits "the extent to which the details of the myth can be expanded and reinterpreted, and also the extent to which the personae which, in the myth, have such pregnant fullness of life, can be developed and amplified" (62). But Echeruo is aware of how myths morph in the creative imagination and discerns in the Ojiyi myth a possible layering of multiple stories and perspectives incarnating the multiformity of human experience:

As is typical in Igboland, there seems a deliberate effort to

avoid making the festival a retelling, or even a reenactment, of an antecedent myth. At no point is the story of Ojiyi's manifestations retold or reenacted nor, in fact, is the story the issue. It is possible, with the hindsight of Greek dramatic history, to conceive of "plays" that tell and retell the Ojiyi story. Indeed, in the Greek tradition it would have been the primary thing to do: to retell the Ojiyi story in a dramatic sequence that might shift the interest from one detail, character, or issue to another. (144)⁵

For his part, Irobi's paradigmatic festival is the Ekpe, a traditional festival for communal expiation, which he, however, appropriates as a potential invaluable resolution to corruption in postcolonial Nigeria. But he did not think the restatement of the festival mode of a loose sequence of events lacking an obvious plotline relating them to the primal archetypal myth practicable on stage. Irobi's insight is to adopt the festive mode marked by drumming and dance while reenacting a recuperated and obviously recreated version of the antecedent myth to give it contemporary resonance while highlighting its ancient significance. In continually adapting a dance-drama model, Irobi validates the centrality of dance in the Igbo culture while indicating awareness both of its semiotic and metonymic potentials.

Onuora Nzekwu accounts for the preeminent position of the dance as an art form among the Igbo by its capacity to "express the whole range of their experience and emotions" (35). Beyond the artistry of stylised and graceful movements, then, he privileges the dance both as body language and the construction of cultural and gendered identities: "The graceful arm movements and swaying hips of the women, the staccato earth-shaking footbeats of the men, the intricate footwork, the pulsating rhythm of the dance, the springing movements and body contortions of the dancers—all these are pregnant with meaning for an entranced and understanding Ibo audience" (35). The insight is the cultural specificity of

structured movements and those movements as codes that *embody* discernible ideologies and distinct ways of life; the consequent recognition therefore is of those movements as *embodiments* of identity markers. Like language, the body, with its coded texts often in the form of structured marks, painting, and scarification, and its capacity to produce movements, plays a preeminent role in the production of both cultural and individual identity.⁶

Ogonna Agu's reading of Igbo dances as theatrical performances often imbued with submerged narratives stresses the intellectual component of the Igbo dance and stresses its conscious articulation of the people's identity. In *egwu amala*, which he traces to the Igbo of the River Niger area, for example, Agu discerns a dialogue between humans and the sea, as he reveals the dance to be a composite of semiotic articulations using movement, costume, mimicry, and gesture, to focalise on the environment and their vocations in the construction of identity:

[The women dancers] perform in concert, using their handkerchiefs to imitate the rhythm of the waves as they rise in the sea. The effect is that of sea breeze coming to break on the beach. Then, with their paddles, they begin to initiate movements that suggest the rowing of a boat. A stage then comes when, after they have reached the seas, they begin to cast their nets. They then make a big catch, but the catch is so big that it is difficult to pull out. In the end the fish is dragged out. Then there is jubilation and excitement as could be seen in the way the dance is brought to a finish. (79)

Meki Nzewi contends, then, that African traditional dances, like music with which they share a kinship of creative and conceptual thoughts, have sense and meaning "implicated in the creative and presentational configurations of African traditional choreography—motives, figuratives, somatic relationships, corporeal gestures and postures, sex-age

determinations, as well as ground formations and stage blocking” (“Beyond Song”101). Meaning as culturally and historically determined is central in Nzewi’s conception of African dance:

In most African cultures dance is conceived and deployed as a nonverbal medium through which cultural narratives and metaphors are tacitly depicted beyond mime. The processing as well as the imaging of dance in Africa implicates unique body poesy visually articulated as a conformation of the artistic content, eurhythmics, and presentational rationalizations. As such, most African dances have underlying lingual texts, sometimes tersely articulated in the titles of the dances or otherwise conveyed as choreological statements for a cognitive audience. The name and meaning of a dance are then communicated as eloquent, visual artistic-aesthetic imagery. (“Beyond Song” 100)

The implications of Nzewi’s conclusion are far reaching: “[S]tage presentations not structured to, sequenced by, vected through, or tipped with music and dance or stylized movement is alien to the inherent Nigerian theatre sensibilities” (“Music” 433). Appreciated, then, that like the dance, music and songs also embody forms of discourses differentiated from dramatic dialogue, close attention must be paid to these discourses in examining Nigerian drama, especially with regard to a playwright like Esiaba Irobi, whose incremental deployment of music, dance, and song texts privileges indigenous theatre’s proclivity for other forms of signification beyond dialogue. However, despite Irobi’s passion for an ideological transformation of society, given his abiding fascination with Igbo propitiatory rituals and the myth of the scapegoat whose sufferings and death expiate the guilt of an entire society, it is perhaps inevitable that he should engage with and illuminate the Igbo vision of tragedy anchored in the complex and mysterious relationship between the individual and his/her chi that Chinua Achebe made a focal issue in his conception of

Okonkwo's fate in *Things Fall Apart*.

The Igbo conception of the human and the universe is readily amenable to tragic interpretation. Acknowledging human mortality and finitude, and, moreover, reverential to the supernatural powers considered capable of influencing human fortune, the Igbo expectation of divine goodwill is nonetheless virtually absolute. The Igbo cult of personal accomplishments through human endeavour, *ikenga*, is the affirmation of the human will: human striving is ordinarily believed to be endowed with the capacity to accomplish required goals. When, however, humans are inhibited in their desires, then they should be willing through prayers, propitiation, and sacrifices at the individual or communal level to seek divine beneficence. The Igbo are well aware that the gods are not obliged to participate in the negotiation of destiny that humans ritually initiate, but their typical response is hardly acceptance.⁷ Igbo discourse is in this regard replete with the people's chastened awareness, even horrified apprehension, of the working out of tragic fate rooted in the concept of *chi* ojoo, "bad chi": "Onye chi ojoo choro imapu imi mapu mkporo anya ya, choo itota mkporo anya ya sojie aka" (A person with a bad chi wanted to blow his nose but blew out his eye, tried to pick up his eye but broke his arm) and "Onye chi ojoo wua nkwuru amu ya akpafara" (If a man with a bad chi jumps over a fence his genitals get stuck) are among many sayings on the plight of the tragic figure. Igbo tragedy could be appreciated as humans' presumptuous persistence in spite of the antithesis between the human will and the disinclination or disability of *chi* to affirm. The Igbo saying "Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe" (If a man affirms, his *chi* affirms too) is really a prayer, an exhortation, but typically uttered as an affirmation!

Emefie E. Metuh calls *chi* the spark of himself that the immanent Supreme Spirit, God, sends into men, natural phenomena, and things (9). Similarly, Chinua Achebe, whose fiction explores extensively Igbo attitudes towards human

destiny and the divine, refers to chi in *Home and Exile* as “Chukwu’s agent, assigned exclusively to [an] individual through his or her life. This Chi, this presence of God, in attendance on every human being, is more powerful in the affairs of that person than any local deity or the conspiracy of any number of such deities against that person” (14). I. Chukwukere, on the other hand, privileges the place of chi in Igbo thought and cosmology as he speculates that the idea of the Supreme Being, Chukwu, may well not be originally Igbo, being perhaps modelled on Christian theology. Regarding chi as the foundation of the Igbo endeavour to comprehend diversities in human experience and fortune regardless of human striving and conduct, he concludes: “[C]hi therefore is a theory of both causation and human personality in the proper context of Igbo people’s cosmology and speculation upon the divinity that determines the nature of man generally and severally. In other words, chi serves as a central and integrating conceptual framework in which the Igboman can reasonably picture to himself the universe, natural and social, in which he willy-nilly lives” (532).

Adiele Afigbo argues that both Chineke and Chukwu do not go further back than the 19th century and arose as a consequence of Christian missionary influence. However, apart from the welter of competing ideas and paradoxes that Afigbo contends the names suggest, it would seem that for the preeminent historian, their gravest failure is indeed linguistic: “Since that [Supreme B]eing must contain more than a union of two divine/spiritual forces (chi and eke) Chineke/Chi-na-ke is clearly inadequate as a name for the ultimate. Similarly Chukwu/Chi-Ukwu is unsatisfactory because it does not account for the other divine force, Eke, which is known to exist. Beyond that, Chukwu/Chi-ukwu suggests as its opposite Chi-Nta, and thus suggests also a state and process of promotion” (*Myth* 213). Afigbo equally considers chi atypical as an Igbo word, as it hardly has a specific meaning. The

problem, however, with the relentless linguistic approach to the Igbo conception of God is the implied assumption that Igbo or indeed any human language can possibly have a word that indisputably incarnates the absolute substance of the divine being. But of course, among the Igbo as among other humans, no word *means* God, as it is essentially the human veneration of an abstract linguistic symbol rather than its unattainable revealed adequacy that arrogates to it the power to connote the idea of God. The chi component of both Chukwu and Chineke possibly suggests more than the centrality of chi in Igbo religious thought; it may also point to a common theological source for the two higher-than-chi terms rather than the unascertainable prescience of any particular sect, indigenous or Christian, expropriating a fundamental Igbo religious belief.

Echeruo admits the complexity of chi as the Igbo theological concept that explains both the universe and individual fortune, "Good and Evil, tragedy and good fortune, order and conflict, character and destiny, free will and metaphysical order" (*Ahamefuna* 20). Noting that a good chi brings prosperity and that a bad chi is a source of tragedy, Echeruo observes nonetheless that a bad chi is neither necessarily absolute nor necessarily a consequence of sin. Prayer is thus an exhortation of chi to action, just as sacrifice aims to appease the spirit forces that interfere with that fulfilment (*Ahamefuna* 21).⁸ In his later writing, Echeruo identifies two separate worlds in Igbo religious thought: the world of the spirits and that of humans. Where the beings of the former world—gods, spirits and similar entities—have power to influence humans, humans too are invested with a power of their own which the gods respect. Human power, however, is extremely precarious, given the influence of malevolent spirits and evil men capable of collaborating with them (Echeruo, "Religion" 18). Sacrifice, therefore, is the obligatory human gesture of recognition of and homage to the gods, the tariff par excellence for human

existence. Thus, the Igbo conception of sacrifice is arguably then a revelation of the Igbo notion of and attitude towards divinity: “Igbo sacrifice is the offering made to the gods and the ancestors to buy peace. It may call for the sacrifice of a hen or a goat; even of a human being, in the most dire circumstances. But it will be done. With “aja” [sacrifice] a general premium is paid, and not necessarily to powers we love or admire, but often to those we fear and even hate. It is the price we pay for being mortal/human; for not being spirit” (Echeruo, “Religion” 19). Echeruo cites Rev. Fr. Dr. Metuh to remark that Igbo sacrifice is not only primarily an act of duty, but often a joyless one: the saying “*Aja agwu ike* summarizes Igbo frustration as well as acceptance of the gods and the necessity of obeisance to them. Humans can never tire of offering sacrifice. The offering of sacrifices is the price we pay to remain human” (“Religion” 18). Indeed, the Igbo saying “*A na-achu aja ikpe na-ama ndi mmuo*” is revealing both in its conception of sacrifice specifically as a token meant to elicit divine goodwill and in its daring arraignment of spirits before a human-authenticated legal code in which human act, sacrifice, is endowed with the power of tilting the scale of justice against the superhuman. This typical robust Igbo sense of human greatness invariably culminates in the conception of the self as a god-man and thus in the annexation of the realms of the gods, who are not completely denied. The inherent presumptuousness in this apprehension of human selfhood is at the core of the humanistic belief in the perfectibility of humans that is pivotal for the emergence of tragedy.⁹ The abiding temptation of the individual to contemplate himself/herself with his/her chi as the ultimate power, or even to covet the powers of chi, is a recurring theme in Igbo tragedy. Irobi’s work, like Soyinka’s, raises fundamental questions about the role of ritual, often in its extreme form of human/self-sacrifice, to ameliorate both individual and communal destiny as well as the tragic dimensions of such rituals.

Irobi's audacious innovativeness indeed consists in his iconoclastic recuperation of Igbo myths and expansion of ritual to facilitate essentially political projects in contemporary postcolonial society; it equally inheres in his transformation of the enchanted figures of Igbo myths and legends, Amadioha, the thunder-throwing god of the sky, Agwu, the deity of contradictions, Ala, the Earth goddess, or their avatars or protégés, into characters in his elemental drama reminiscent of the Greeks' and Soyinka's to point to human dilemmas beyond explicit political frameworks, integral instead with the timeless vision of tragedy. Thus, the favourite locale of Irobi's most important works, just like Soyinka's, is in the context of what is generally regarded as the deepest and most ostentatious expression of both African art and religion: the festival, a veritable convocation of humans and gods.¹⁰ Soyinka discerns in the heart of African festivals distinctive African theatre comprising as they do "a variety of forms, from the most spectacular to the most secretive and emotionally charged [. . .] the integration of the sublime with the mundane, the endowment of the familiar with the properties of the unique (and this spread over days)" (*Art* 138). Balme cites Victor Turner to acknowledge this "impressive polyphonic combination of acoustic, kinesic, and visual sign systems" (69) as resources of the ritual-based performances of oral cultures. Turner's awe is evident in his impressive enumeration of "an immense orchestration of genres in all available sensory codes: speech, music, singing; the presentation of elaborately worked objects, such as masks, wall-paintings, body paintings; sculptured forms; complex, many-tiered shrines; costumes; dance forms with complex grammars and vocabularies of bodily movements, gestures and facial expressions" (Turner, *Anthropology* 26).

Contending that Turner's striving to establish a theoretical link between the concepts of liminality and performance is pivotal in his wider theory of "social drama," Balme observes:

“The term ‘liminality’ has been adopted [from Arnold van Gennep] and expanded to refer to most kinds of ritual performance which create a kind of interim space or period outside the bounds of normal social practice and structures, which he terms a ‘betwixt-and-between condition’” (77). Balme takes pains to stress correspondences between Turner’s and Soyinka’s articulations of the concept of liminality and explores in compelling details Soyinka’s exploitation of ritual possession as a dramaturgical device with a virtually infinite layering of metaphysical, social, and political implications. Especially in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (for Irobi his canonical text), the playwright’s recognition of the antistructural potentialities of the liminal moment as one of possible collapse or transformation of values characterises his interpretation of the cultural significance of British imperial entry into Yoruba life.

Beginning from 1991 when *Nwokedi* was published, Irobi learnt from Soyinka the stunning theatrical potentialities of appropriating Turner’s “immense orchestration of genres in all available sensory codes,” which after the austere performative style of *The Strong Breed* became Soyinka’s expressive model in *The Road* and *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Irobi also learnt to set his plays at portentous moments of transition. He typically chose as his protagonists priests, priestesses, and medicine men, artists, intellectuals, and political visionaries given to moments of possession with the deity, or an idea, or at any rate to inspired intellectual voyaging, in their passion to heal and renew an ailing body, spirit, or body politic in anguish. In the African festival, Irobi discerned two critical components: “metaphysics and theatrical ecstasies,” which even an insider would require initiation to begin to apprehend (*Nwokedi* iii). Herbert Cole draws attention to the seamless fusion in the festival of the sacred and the profane, the real and the illusionistic, the serious and the play element in the people’s transformation of “their community

into an intensified idealized world of communion among gods and men" (61). Cole characterises the (African) festival in its content, depth, breadth and complexity as awesome:

A festival is a relatively rare climactic event in the life of any community. It is bounded by a definite beginning and end, and is unified thereby, as well as in being set apart from and above daily life. Its structure is built up on a core or armature of ritual. The festival brings about a suspension of ordinary time, a transformation of ordinary space, a formalization of ordinary behavior. It is as if a community becomes a stage set and its people actors with a battery of seldom seen props and costumes. Meals become feasts, and greetings, normally simple, become ceremonies. Although dependent upon life-sustaining rituals, the festival is an elaborated and stylized phenomenon which far surpasses ritual necessity. It often becomes the social, ritual, and political apotheosis of community life in a year. At festival time one level of reality—the common and everyday—gives way to another, a more intense, symbolic, and expressive level of reality. (12)

Irobi appreciated and articulated the logic of the African accomplishment of such complex performances: "[A]n African community without a clear theory of its intended performance cannot create a theatrical form or tradition which involves the participation of all members of the community, from men to women to children. Equally, without an organizing theory, the much desired spiritual and political efficacy of the performance which stems from a competent activation and execution of the iconographic, sonic, kinaesthetic, calligraphic, sartorial, proxemic literacies of the given culture cannot be achieved" ("Theory of Ase" 18).

Irobi's responses ranged from awe through scholarly curiosity to pupillage or apprenticeship. As the festival and Africa's other performances could hardly be perpetuated but in themselves, Irobi writes of elaborate arrangements made

with Amankulor “to conduct extensive salvage research on West African festival theatre [. . .] to capture on both video and film, for posterity the major ceremonies and indigenous festival and ritual performances extant among representative indigenous cultures” (*African* 7) since earlier research conducted in Nigeria had indicated to them the threat posed to those art forms. With Amankulor’s death in 1995 that intention came to grief, and Irobi writes also of a similar intended project with the Nigerian theatre scholar, Osita Okagbue, to “remap” Nigeria through dance: “That is, show how cultural identity in the Nigerian context can be redefined not through boundaries or even language, physiognomy, or so-called ‘tribal’ marks, but through kinaesthetic literacy” (*African* 8). Irobi’s own death no doubt intervened in the accomplishment of that project. But the two projects privilege Irobi’s modes of reverence and scholarly inquiry. On the one hand, he discerns how the ancient passion to translate what is precious but transient into an enduring art form is given ironical urgency in oral postcolonial societies by the mortality of even crucial art forms. On the other, he is demonstrative about the spirited endeavour to understand how indigenous art forms mean, and to articulate (often with considerable bravado) a theory of oral literature and performance on the model of the impressive orthodox vocabulary and phraseology of much of poststructuralist theory. It is, however, in the plays that he wrote and published while at Nsukka and Leeds between 1982 and 2010 that the pivotal mode of pupillage is demonstrated: the devoted exploration of the living tradition of the people for insights into performative dramaturgy and modes of imagining the human which he audaciously adapts and recreates.

Chapter

2



Irobi's Early Drama: An Adventure of Postcolonial Theatrical Forms

Irobi's first three plays, *Gold*, *Frankincense and Myrrh*, *Hangmen Also Die*, and *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, were published in 1989. Diverse in themes and preoccupations, in form and in the conception and deployment of stagecraft, they can all be considered experimental and exploratory gestures in the emergent writer's search for socially viable and responsible themes and even possible artistic models. The plays reveal that Irobi thought his immediate challenge at the outset of his career as a playwright was to be negotiating the transition from precolonial to postcolonial praxis. He also saw as crucial in the struggle for the evolution of a viable postcolonial political philosophy the appropriation of the morality of old Africa inscribed in its value systems and rituals of communal expiation and regeneration. Thus, Irobi explored staging the drama of postcolonial Africa by appropriating the techniques of those rituals and other indigenous performed events as a necessary aesthetic component of the same project. The least dramatically successful of the three plays, the most controversial and probably the last to be written, *Gold*, *Frankincense and Myrrh* foregrounds these in a special way.

Given its reference to Soyinka's Nobel Prize, *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* obviously could not have been completed before 1986, though its academic freight harks back to the crucial literary debates of some two decades earlier. The play indeed is a possible parody of the many conferences of the 1960s and '70s in which African writers and scholars attempted to identify and define the prime virtues of neo-African literature even where the immediate stimulus of the partly high-spirited but primarily acrimonious debate in the play is the furore generated by the publication of the controversial text *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* by the "troika critics," Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. Chris Dunton calls the play "a burlesque treatment, caustically funny, of the Soyinka/Chinweizu row" (9). Irobi discerned at the core of all that rancorous argument a recognition of literature as crucial for a people much maligned by colonialism and colonialist discourse to reclaim its dignity and stake a claim in world civilisation. The legitimate balance between the creative appropriation of the resources of the indigenous tradition and an openness to invigorating suggestions deriving from the international practice; the appropriate audience and constituency of African literature and consequently the legitimate language of its expression and even mode of its deployment; the uses of that literature; even the legitimate assessors of that literature and the acceptable laurels that its writers could aspire to: these were the substance of the seminal debates and are given a farcical treatment in *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh*.

As his engagement is not a literal transcription of history, Irobi expectedly does not quite give his characters the names of the historical writers and scholars whose roles they play. However, given his accumulation of revealing clues, characteristic expressions, positions, and affiliations, the very thin veil thrown over the already suggestive names is easily raised. The sober, sagacious, self-effacing but firm figure

named "Achibiri" who intervenes in the heat of the debate, drawing on the proverbial lore of his (Igbo) ethnic group, is unmistakable even without his curious allusions to the titles of his novels: "Lady and gentlemen, with my characteristic modesty I must say that we are no longer at ease. (*Pointing at Prof. Ogun*) Up there is a man of the people. (*Pointing at Izuwa and Co*) Here are the arrows of African literature. With characteristic impartiality I will not take sides. No sane father stays at home and watches his children fight to death" (39-40). Neither is the identity of Ayi Kwesi Baako intended to mystify the spectator/reader, as he is introduced as a Ghanaian novelist, exalts the universalist dimension of all important literature, painstakingly cultivates a distinctive eschatological or excremental imagery, stresses the sovereignty of the artist, and transforms the titles of his works into a portentous prophesy of doom: "The beautiful ones are not yet born. And until two thousand seasons to come we shall be in fragments because it is a whole lotta shit prescribing for writers" (43). Irobi likewise provides a short passage from the character Femi Osofola to the Nigerian playwright and poet of renowned Marxist affiliation, Femi Osofisan, through Osofola's fiery oration:

The only way out, as far as I am concerned, is a revolution. It is the only ray of light in this dark night of purposeless and misguided creative writing and criticism. The writer must, repeat, must gear up his efforts towards revolutionizing the minds of our people. This is what I call the revolutionary ethos. We must aim at reforms, sweeping reforms. We must seek the lot of the common lot. We must forget about mythologies and ancient gods and their modern reincarnations because these turgidities are responsible for the literary pandemonium in the air today. (46)

However, the main burden of the play is the troika critics' allegations against Professor Ogun about his indulgence in obscurantism and use of an esoteric mythological framework. Those allegations too, like Osofola's final remark in the passage

above, and the debates they generate, have well-documented historical antecedents.

That Soyinka is named in *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* after the Yoruba deity whom he has so passionately proclaimed as his god and given preeminence in his writing in the Yoruba and even African pantheon is easy enough to establish. The character is, however, intriguing, as he is not merely a recognisable Soyinka figure named after the Yoruba deity. Ogun is Irobi's daring conflation of Soyinka the artist and his Muse. He embodies attributes of the man and those that Soyinka associates with the god, central among which is the proclivity for creation and destruction. Ogun's speeches and actions then resonate with history and myth even as they illustrate the indispensable conscious recreation and representation of experience for particular artistic goals that is a hallmark of art. Irobi's attitude to the character is at the same time apparently disparaging and deferential.

Ogun's response to the allegation of obscurantism is to hew the style in marble: "Obscurantism is the creative symptom of a deep running inspiration. It is the distinguishing characteristic between a great writer and middle-of-the-road writers. It is the volcanic effluvium of literary ingenuity" (25). Irobi's amplified mimicry of Soyinka's famous dismissal of Negritude does not merely serve to identify the writer, but is an obvious parody meant to evoke censure: "A tiger does not preach his tigritude. Neither does a gorilla preach his gorillatude. Only buffoons preach their buffoonery and nycompoops their nycompoopery" (29). And he demonstrates that the arrogant desperation for distinctiveness of style could easily degenerate to sheer absurdity: "Exciting artistry founts from a selective eclectism. A recapitulative, retrospective and expansive sensitivity may mechanize the universal syzgy of this sonsodius umbra" (29). The deliberate distortion and obvious caricature quite apart, Ogun's comment carries the faintest echo of Soyinka's proclamation: "I cannot claim a

transparency of communication even from the sculpture, music and poetry of my own people the Yoruba, but the aesthetic matrix is the fount of my own creative inspiration; it influences my critical response to the creation of other cultures and validates selective eclecticism as the right of every productive being" (*Art* 305). Irobi's transparent anagrams are meant to enhance the transposition from *dramatis personae* to historical personages. This helps make discernible the representative positions Irobi highlights even when these are refracted through the deliberately distorted lens of the playwright's withering satire. But if there is ascertainable evaluative commentary in Irobi's representation of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* as "Towards the Devastation of African Literature," the playwright does not quite let Soyinka off easily in the case of a rather deliberately obfuscating language in spite of Ogun's eventual triumph in the play.¹

Pivotal, however, in the tirades between Soyinka and the troika critics, as Derek Wright has noted, is an insightful disparity in the conception of African culture:

For Soyinka, African poetic and artistic traditions exist not in purist terms but as a dynamic flux that is constantly being created, and even new additions that appear to break with these traditions are part of an interactive process that renews them by infusing them with new energy. For Chinweizu and his coauthors of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, these same traditions, particularly the oral tradition, seem rather to constitute an immaculate, petrified bloc of immutable wisdoms, a cultural museum of poetic exotica walled off from the modern world in which most Africans now live, and to tamper with them is to attract the charge of "Euromodernization" or "Westernization." (183)

Abjuring the characterisation of his hybridised conception of tragedy in "The Fourth Stage" as "Europhile," Soyinka points to the inevitable hybridisation and syncretisation of cultures: "There is no way at all that I will ever preach the cutting off of

any source of knowledge: Oriental, European, African, Polynesian, or whatever" (*Conversations* 123). In *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh*, one of the troika critics calls Ogun a "dedicated plagiarist" for acknowledging influences, even when it must be noted that the mode of the acknowledgment itself is rather intriguing: "I have been influenced by a lot of influences including foreign influences. Since the beginning of the world, writers have always borrowed, and shamelessly too. Shakespeare borrowed from Plutarch and Seneca. Seneca borrowed from the Greeks. The history of creative writing has been one long scroll of borrowing" (49). In making the troika critics arrive at the venue of the debate directly from the United States, ravenous for an African woman, hungry for "home beer," and even renouncing and casting off their foreign names to assume indigenous ones, all in the name of tradition, Irobi literally takes his cue from Soyinka who remarks that "it is invariably the uprooted, the culturally alienated who turn back to the roots with the fierceness of the long-deprived—and with it corresponding ignorance" (*Art* 176).

The Nobel Prize winner holds deep fascination for the younger playwright for whom he apparently incarnates the temper of genius: "Obviously, obviously, I am a genius. Souls like mine appear once in every three generations" (*Gold* 51). Those who denounce him in public inwardly hold him in deep reverence, and there is certain merit in his conviction that he is a man more sinned against than sinning, though he appears to evoke the persecution to suggest an inescapable passage from the experience of torture to a tortuous style of writing:

What do you know about my sufferings, my anguish from my clashes with governments? Has any of you ever been in prison, in prison for his convictions as an artist? Have you ever had the truth of your existence chained and pegged behind the cold steel of prison bars? Have you ever been jailed by narrow-minded politicians and a cement-hearted military head of state. Why should you castrate my artistic

virility [?] Do you know why I speak in tongues? Why I squeeze meaning out of stubborn stone-faced words? Why I bury my meanings in the mud-bed of linguistic ambiguity? (Gold 36-37)

Ogun's defiant affirmation of distinction re-echoes much later in Irobi's work in the anguished voice of the protagonist of *The Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike. Reputed like Professor Ogun to create in a state of entrancement, Jamike is equally the embodiment of the visionary artist, part genius and part mad man. That Jamike is in many ways also Irobi's veritable self-portrait is telling. The trajectory of Irobi's career will tend more and more to Wole Soyinka's, though with a more explicit interest in politics. That deeper political interest on occasion, as in *Hangmen Also Die*, apparently resonates with Osofola's/Osofisan's impassioned espousal of a Marxist revolution. But then again with the younger writer, Marxism excites further the iconoclastic zeal for the demolition of old structures.

Irobi interpreted the striking coincidence of his birthday sharing the day of Nigeria's independence from Britain in terms of a destiny shared with the Nigerian nation, a destiny of agony and pain. In 1989, he told an interviewer, Nengi Ilagha: "The historical rigor mortis and political epilepsy of the country itself has left cracks on the mirror of the mind. Whatever has happened to the country has happened to me [. . .]" (11). Irobi's diagnosis of the cause of that "political epilepsy" locates it in the corruption of the Nigerian leadership—politicians and soldiers alike. Assuming a responsibility for engendering a political rebirth in the country, Irobi's theatre expectedly has a covert political preoccupation. He is fascinated both by the will to power and the psychopathology of dispossession as well as by their compulsions to violence. Contending that power seeks its own perpetuation typically through violence, he equally demonstrates that material dispossession induces mental possession and that terror enhances the self-esteem of the dispossessed. Thus, Irobi's mode of contemplating society

and his preferred paradigms for transformation apparently invoke Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon—but typically with strategic modification.²

Irobi's 1989 interview with Nengi Ilagha reveals a preoccupation with the revolutionary potentials of jobless youths that is central likewise in *Hangmen Also Die*, published in the same year. He tells Ilagha: "The unemployment factor will determine the shape and content of the revolution that is brewing, because revolutions do not start in the head but from the stomach" (12). Irobi's premier exponent of a Marxist revolution in *Hangmen Also Die*, Dr Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe, shares the playwright's insight. Ogbansiegbe recognises joblessness as an abiding condition of the youth in Third World countries with a history of irresponsible governments and considers his undergraduate students potential revolutionaries. However, described as "a heavily bearded man who looked like the African reincarnation of Fidel Castro" and as "a Marxist who had memorized Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto from cover to cover" (*Hangmen* 25), Ogbansiegbe is obviously not primarily concerned with class struggles. He is basically Fanonian in his ostensible obsession with decolonisation and his impassioned advocacy of a violent revolutionary ethic that encompasses terrorism, guerrilla and full-blown warfare and even mere anarchy. His perception of revolutions as a grim contest in which the oppressor and the oppressed necessarily strive for preeminence by recourse to violence is pure Fanon. Writing on the necessity of violence in the decolonisation process in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon contends: "The naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists" (28). Fanon's inscription of violence as the singular indispensable action capable of initiating the dispossessed into social truths and enhancing their mastery of them is possibly the ultimate

fanaticism:

Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. There's nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving: and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the Middle Ages, endlessly marking time. (118)

Ogbansiegbe's exhortation of his disciples to mayhem clearly repeats Fanon's ethic of indispensable revolutionary violence, and even his parody of a liberation song may have been suggested by Fanon's politically farcical blaring of trumpets and celebration: "So I want you to write this down on the walls of your mind, and remember it now and always, that revolutions are always based on terrorism. Revolutions are always based on violence. On bloodshed and terror. Revolutions are never achieved by holding hands and singing: 'We shall overcome'" (*Hangmen* 25-26). For Ogbansiegbe, however, Fanon's ideological fanaticism degenerates into sheer misanthropy: "So, comrades, do not burn but also kill. Mutilate your adversaries on the public highway. Pierce their eyes. Cut off their arms and tongues. Hang them by the neck. Spill their blood" (*Hangmen* 26). Irobi's revelation that Ogbansiegbe's ideological posturing is a disguise for a vengeful private war makes him Irobi's model of the exploitation of a high-minded ideological postulation for a selfish end. Fanon's probing of the impact of the public scene of politics on the mind of the dispossessed is an ascertainable model of Irobi's analysis of the psychopathology of dispossession in *Hangmen also Die*. Furthermore, Ogbansiegbe's response to injustice makes him a truly fascinating psychological study: the self is ultimately the great inhibitor to altruistic action.

Ben Obumselu has identified Fanon as Marx's foremost

black exponent and remarks that his appeal to African scholars and writers derives from the fact that Fanon makes the black revolution his primary loyalty and recognises the teeming and refractory particulars of time and circumstance, where Marx's paradigms are (ostensibly) timeless and universal (109, 111). However, in the early Fanon, that is, before the treacherous refusal of the French communists to support Algerian independence drove him to a sociological rather than a revolutionary perspective on social inequity, Obumselu discerns an adaptation of Marx aimed at accommodating the "subjective angle of a psychiatrist and a Sartrean existentialist" (109). Remarking further on Fanon's subjectivism, Obumselu cites the Vietnamese Marxist, Nguyen Nghe's objection to Fanon's advocacy of private acts of violence without a viable social purpose. Observing that Fanon's view was based on the insight that the inner unity of the individual is the ultimate value, Obumselu traces many paranoid characters in African literature to this influential Fanonian belief.

Robert Young accounts for Fanon's conflation of the subjective and objective realms of the impact of colonialism by placing it in its proper historical context. Francophone African activists, beginning from Tonalou Houenou, had been distinguished by their concern not only for the realm of history, economic history, sociality, and materiality, but also for the human experience of colonialism and decolonisation by both the colonised and the coloniser (Young, *Postcolonialism* 274). Young nonetheless argues that Fanon's distinction lies in his provision of a psychopathology of colonialism by his integration of the subjective and objective realms at the theoretical and psychological rather than poetic level (276). Young then notes Fanon's centrality in postcolonial theory and traces the concern in postcolonial writing with individual human experience and cultural identity alongside the more objective field of history partly to his influence (275). The paranoid drive towards psychic health may well be the substance of Irobi's appropriation of

Fanon, as in *Hangmen Also Die* a version of Fanon filters through to the members of the Suicide Squad as students, through their lecturer-mentor, Dr Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe.

In his reading of *Hangmen also Die*, A.B.C. Duruaku is perturbed by the recourse of the members of the Suicide Squad to violence as a response to social deprivation: "What is surprising is that people of such high education and ideals could degenerate to solving problems by brute force applied to the masses. Is Irobi exploring man's basic degeneracy and atavistic tendencies in spite of the 'superficial' polish of higher education?" (104). Duruaku is also intrigued by Irobi's assignation of names and finds both the group's name, "Suicide Squad", and the individual sobriquets of the members "morbid". He speculates further that "Irobi chooses to temper the seriousness of the problem [he explores in the play] by trivializing the characters and giving the teenage personages 'babyish' attitudes and fantasies" (105). Duruaku is indeed near the mark but for the error in the identification of agency. Irobi's theme is the social trivialisation or inferiorisation of the individual and the possible range of an individual's responses to it; his aim is the externalisation of the inward devastation of institutionalised social deprivation. He explores the gamut of human responses in that situation, ranging from a virtually socially harmless mythomania (of which the assumption of awe-inspiring names is a specie) to suicide bombing.

Irobi indicates his preoccupation with subjective human experience early enough in *Hangmen Also Die* through the obsession of the prison hangman, Yekini, with the state of mind of the condemned on the eve of their execution. He sets in relief Yekini's deeply tormented mind through sundry suggestions, including: Yekini's fascinating assumption that the imminence of death is a powerful force capable of transforming the human face from a possible mask of deceit to a dependable and luminous reflection of the state of the human soul; his morbid apprehension that a condemned

prisoner's state of grace incriminates and condemns the executioner; and his hallucinations of being haunted by the ghosts and relatives of those he had executed. And if Yekini's obviously enigmatic account of the failures of government by his citation of both the depredations of material poverty and the ravages of his mind are not clinically instructive (since they also highlight Irobi's fascination with both the objective and subjective space), his performance in the encounter with the prison doctor authenticates the latter's diagnosis:

Yekini: (*bitterly*) Where I live I have no water. I have no light. The stream is two miles away. And I have no car.

Doctor: You are not alone in this plight, Yekini. Millions of people all over the country are suffering from the same fate. And the government is trying its best.

Yekini: The government again! Which useless government again! Doc, be careful. Be careful with me. Otherwise I damage your life. (*the gloved hand flashes out*)

Doctor: (*shrinking*) Yekini control yourself. . .

Yekini: (*agonizingly*) Can your useless government protect me from the faces of the dead, the death masks I see every second in my sleep, my dream, by daylight and moonlight? Can the government erase the scar their grin leaves on my soul?

Doctor: Yekini those faces you see are hallucinations [. . .] They exist, Yekini. They do. (*Yekini relaxes*) But as the figments of your imagination. (*Yekini moves forward*) But I can erase them from your memory.

Yekini: (*stops*) How?

Doctor: Through psycho-analysis and counselling.

(Hangmen 16-17)

Yekini's resignation of his job rather than hang the members of the Suicide Squad condemned for murdering Chief Erokosima (who had embezzled funds meant for compensating the victims of oil spillage) validates their action as heroic and purposeful with the potential ideological consequence of a fairer redistribution of wealth. His resolution to return to the sea as a fisherman in one of the most evocative passages in the play is equally a search for psychic health and locates in nature a beneficence that is lacking in a perverse postcolonial system of human justice:

Yekini: *(at the edge of the stage)* Superintendent! *(bitterly, as the Superintendent turns)* Their blood is on your head. *(as he removes his uniform and rolls it into a bundle)* I shall return to the sea. I shall return to my paddle and my net. To my canoe and the creeks. I shall return to my living as a fisherman. To sail the ocean, the deep blue ocean, the Atlantic, where on a night, when the moon is full and happy, if I look hard enough on the surface of the water, I can see the face of God. *(he hurls the bundle at the Superintendent. It lands on his chest. Yekini turns away towards the audience. Under his breath . . .)* The Sea is life! (92-93)

In Irobi's portraits of the members of the Suicide Squad, the processes through which the ravages of social deprivations culminate in violent reprisals on society are even more dramatically staged.

Fanon's analysis of the colonial situation highlights the dominant group's systematic inferiorisation of the oppressed group and its values as well as the cathartic role of violence in

restoring self-esteem and dignity to the oppressed: “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (*Wretched* 74). Fanon remarks further that “the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” (68). Irobi, much like many other writer/activist readers of Fanon, accepts Fanon’s opinion as a valid generalised insight applicable in all conditions of social deprivation and makes it the inspiration of his representative socially deprived characters. Dimeari’s conception of his condition as well as his envisaged resolution of it in his plea to join the Suicide Squad draws demonstrably from Fanon:

I am a reject of the society. A piece of human furniture standing unobserved in the living room of a blind world. I feel empty. I feel impotent, I feel useless. I want to do something that will shock the world. Something that will make the world realize that I exist. And also make me feel I am somebody. Something challenging. Something violent. Some form of dangerous employment. (*Hangmen* 51)

For the seven members of the Suicide Squad, all distinguished graduates from Nigerian universities and each with at least seven years of grim experience in the labour market, self-esteem is at its lowest and a seething hatred for the dehumanising system at its highest. Their self-appraisal is marked by a despondent self-deflation that is a consequence of their agonising acceptance of the consciousness of wretchedness imposed on them by an alienating society:

R.I.P: (*rising*) We are no revolutionaries. Neither are we guerrillas. We are not even freedom fighters fighting for any such thing as our nation’s independence.

Dayan: (*his eyes shining*) We are professional burglars.

R.I.P: *(bitterly)* Degenerates!
 Acid: Small time thieves graduating into armed robbers.
 R.I.P: *(more bitterly)* Desperadoes!
 Dayan: We are the stuff villains are made of.
 R.I.P: The sewage in the gutter.
 Chorus: We are the wretched of the earth.
 (Hangmen 24)

Referring to the title of Fanon's seminal work on revolutionary violence, Irobi *dramatises* the validity of Fanon's insight on the oppressed individual's recourse to violence and terror to attain inner unity and self-consciously frames a comparison between his work and Fanon's postulations. Irobi understood the psychic necessity of violence, but clearly thought its pivotal role was structural.

The two crucial interventions that completely redefine the conception of violence for the members of the Suicide Squad (first as members of Comrades under Ogbansiegbe's tutelage and then in their more sinister incarnation as the Suicide Squad) reveal Irobi's ideological investment in revolutionary violence. Trapped by Ogbansiegbe's exhortations to purposeless anarchy, the group accepts as a revelation a colleague's inspired recognition of their exploitation and the dire need for ideological reorganisation:

A revolution is always organised. Its strategies planned out. Its aims and objectives mapped out. A revolution is always planned and executed by a generation. In doing this, they have no need for an ideological mentor or an ideological Methuselah. We are just tools in Dr. Ogbasiegbe's hands. Spanners and hammers in the hands of a political mechanic. We have allowed him to sell to us an insane philosophy: Terrorism! Comrades, terrorism is useless if we are not organised. *(Hangmen 28)*

Fanon not only emphasised organisation, but equated

correct ideological and intellectual leadership: "The task of bringing the people to maturity will be made easier by the thoroughness of the organization and by the high intellectual level of its leaders" (*Wretched* 117). Irobi clearly did not think that that leadership had to be Marxist. His exposure of Dr Ogbansiegbe as merely a vengeful power-hungry politician initiates a career-long interrogation of self-acclaimed Marxist messiahs. The list would also include the womanising Dr Animalu in *The Other Side of the Mask* for whom Marxism is mere rhetoric, and Lawani in *Cemetery Road* who recants the Marxist ideology of his university days for bread and butter. Narrowly egotistical, incapable of selfless commitment, treacherous to friends and the fatherland, they illustrate the hollowness of ideological tags in the struggle for social reforms. Irobi offers no theoretical refutation of Marxism but his depictions of Marxist characters are consistently unrelievedly morally gloomy. It is significant that Animalu is killed by a masked figure at a moment of self-indulgence; the other two are victims of affirmative communal action. In Irobi's drama, these modes of death are strongly suggestive of indictment. In *Hangmen Also Die*, Tamara's transforming remonstrations with members of the Suicide Squad highlight Irobi's ideal: the reconciliation of purposeful revolutionary action with selfless social commitment:

Your mates in other parts of the world are guerrilla fighters, fighting for the liberation of their country. Haven't you heard of the Frelimo of Mozambique? The M.P.L.A. of Angola? The A.N.C of Azania? The Mujahidin of Afghanistan? The Mau Mau of Kenya and the SWAPO of Namibia? Young men dying for their land. Here you hide in the bush and burgle people's houses in the night. (*Hangmen* 62)

Irobi accounts for Tamara's daring, defiance, and even apparent sacrosanctity by oblique though sustained allusions to her priesthood. But this is largely unexplored and thus mystifying. That mystery, however, is pivotal in Irobi's other

early play, *The Colour of Rusting Gold*.

The Colour of Rusting Gold had its first important production in 1982 at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka as the University's Convocation Play.³ An early but important play in the writer's oeuvre, *The Colour of Rusting Gold* highlights some of the themes that were to remain constant in his drama. In the play, Irobi is enthralled by Igbo concepts of liminality and divination as well as by the challenges and dangers to the life of ritual piety. His diviner-herbalist protagonist, Otagburuagu, reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's towering protagonist of *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, describes himself as "half man, half spirit" (*Colour* 10) and as a helper of God, the creator: "I help the creator Chukwu... I am the fountain, the stream, the spring that floods the barren earth making it a virgin soil that yields a harvest that amazes the eyes of the sky" (35). Celibate, poor, and with an absolute aversion to blood, Otagburuagu lives a life of self-mortification to keep the spirit awake and give it full rein:

I am a medicine man. A man called to the service of the gods; a man who lives in the spirit world; a man who bridges the gap between the shrine of the spirits and the mud walled world of men. A man whom the spirits he serves have decreed that he must not marry. . . [A man] who stands at the seven cross-roads and ferries the spirits of troubled men over the other world. With bare fingers I bring out *the yolk of the moon* before it hardens in the throat of men. (*Colour* 34-35; emphasis added)

Irobi's fascinating association of the moon with madness in the passage above and in several other passages in the play (especially the one in which Otagburuagu's mad patient Oriakanjonuchichi links his condition with the phases of the moon) is possibly just a pedantic play on the etymology of "lunatic" as "moon-struck." However, the invocation of the moon to suggest madness and the conception of Otagburuagu's moral integrity in terms of luminosity resonate in a striking manner with Achebe's gripping symbolism of the

moon in *Arrow of God* and thus strengthens Otagburuagu's resemblance to Achebe's Ezeulu. Commenting on Achebe's association of the moon with both madness and mystic illumination in Ezeulu's experience, Abiola Irele writes:

It is significant that [Ezeulu] is introduced at the beginning of the novel in the act of searching the heavens for signs of the new moon, and the immediate association of this activity with his priestly function suggests the possibility of its unsettling effect upon his mind. The narrator establishes, moreover, a connection between what we have seen as Ezeulu's inclination towards a mystic disposition and the artistic endowment manifested by his son Edogo, with the power of illumination that this confers. (103)

It is, of course, precisely Otagburuagu's loss of this mystic radiance (in metaphoric terms, his eclipse) that is the central theme of *The Colour of Rusting Gold* and the source of its title. The central paradox in liminality between material lack and ritual wealth or secular weakness and sacred power is equally at the core of Irobi's paradoxical conception of Otagburuagu's mystic luminosity and his temptations in terms of the glitter of gold.

Victor Turner locates the symbolism of the moon in the larger context of ritual liminality:

The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by the law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness,

and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (*Ritual* 95)⁴

Turner has noted the institutionalisation of liminality in the monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions and offers a speculative account of the process. The set of transitional qualities “betwixt and between” that had defined states of tribal culture and society arguably became an institutionalised state in itself with the increasing specialisation of society and culture: “But traces of the passage quality of the religious life remain in such formulations as: ‘The Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveller, with no place to rest his head.’ Transition has here become a permanent condition” (*Ritual* 107). Turner uses “outsiderhood” in his later writing to describe the condition of being permanently outside the structural arrangements of a given social system as opposed to the betwixt-and-between state of liminality, and numbers among such outsiders “shamans, diviners, mediums, priests, those in monastic seclusions, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies” (*Dramas* 232-33).⁵ In *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, Irobi inscribes his protagonist’s priesthood as a condition of permanent liminality and, like Soyinka, stages *transition* or *passage* as a condition of becoming, fraught with tragic propensities.

The Igbo awareness of the possibility of living one’s liminality as a permanent condition is inscribed in the conception of the great diviner as “okara-mmuo, okara-mmadu” (half-spirit, half-human), a concept that Achebe aptly appropriates in his description of Ezeulu as “half man and half spirit” (*Arrow* 133). Irobi conceives of Otagburuagu as the incarnation of this ideal and foregrounds that fact by adroitly staging Otagburuagu’s indeterminate and multivalent personality in the initial episode in the play where his apprentice, Ogidi, recounts the uncanny story of his father’s death and apparitions. Initially auditor to a narrative he claims ignorance of, Otagburuagu imperceptibly becomes a knowledgeable interlocutor, a probable crucial member of the *dramatis personae*, and eventually friend and comrade of the protagonist whose identity he finally

mysteriously claims to share. Ogidi's response to the diviner's otherworldliness is incomprehension and terror:

- Ogidi: (turning) What did you say?
Otagbu: I was not talking to you. I was talking to my companions.
Ogidi: Where are they?
Otagbu: (*Lets out a grating burial ground laughter that leaves Ogidi clothed with goose dimples (sic)*) They are everywhere my son. (*He looks up and down, sits on the mud wall surrounding his shrine. Stares bizarrely at Ogidi*)
Ogidi: You remind me of my dead father . . .
Osuagwu.
Otagbu: We are all the same!
Ogidi: Are you a ghost?
Otagbu: No I am a half-man, half-spirit
Ogidi: You really look frightening; especially the way you are sitting on that mud wall...
Otagbu: Like Osuagwu sitting on his grave. . . .
(*Colour 10*)

Sustained references to Otagburuagu's constant communion with his mysterious companions and to his having four eyes serve to accentuate and keep in constant view his otherworldliness. Taboos expectedly proliferate at the shrine and demand strict observance as they constitute necessary sacraments against the imperfections of the mortal condition in an attempt to maintain in precarious balance the inevitable tension inherent in any effort to reconcile disincarnate purity and tainted human nature. Otagburuagu cautions Ogidi: "Listen, a man who meddles with spirits must not mess up with men. For men are a neat mess on the surface of this earth where the spirits sit when they visit us" (*Colour 27*). In a ritual demonstration of his embodiment of the contrasting powers

to destroy and to create, Otagburuagu first invokes fire and brimstone on an obtrusive politician, Nanimgaebi, and then turns to bless an expectant mother, Nnenna, but not without reflecting in deep anguish on the tenuous path he must habitually tread:

Let the sky darken. Let the clouds become pregnant. Let them seal off the eyes of the sun. Let lightning and thunder take over the dance. Let death and disaster dance in the distance. Let the gods cough across the stomach of a starving sky. (*slowly*) Let the dog that will not hear his master-hunter's call follow the spirits home. Let the callous cock which refuses to be tamed sleep in the tree-top. (*S.e. Thunder, Lightning. He turns and faces a very scared Nnenna*). My pregnant daughter do not be afraid. A half-man half-spirit lives in two worlds. He seeks his peace from two fragmented worlds at war with each other. (*Colour* 27-28)

The arrogation of ritual status to a desired human action transforms it into an obligation by the invocation of superhuman authority. Thus, orderliness at the shrine does not merely serve to ensure fairness, respect to others, and the creation of a necessary contemplative atmosphere in which the divinity of the god is experienced and revered. Noisemaking instead has to be appreciated as a threat to the presence of the diviner's companions and may even have a mortal repercussion just as jumping the queue has dire mystical consequences. Again, as in many other instances, Otagburuagu's recognition of the need for Ogidi's initiation into the mysteries of the god Aha-Njoku is the playwright's means of explaining ritual action:

I told you to guard the door and call in patients in the order in which they came. A rogue came in here and greased your palms. You let him in. That very minute that wild animal crossed my threshold, I was blindfolded. My companions stuck wax into my ears. My eyes became hazy. My feet

weighty, even now, my back is bursting. I am now a beast of burden . . . carrying your curse. (*Colour* 26)

Even beyond the repeated affirmation of the inseparability of diviner and apprentice and the latter's responsibility for the former's action, more crucially, Otagburuagu is presented as the symbolic scapegoat of his entire community in his capacity as its moral conscience. Otagburuagu denounces Nanimgaebi's importunate appeals to eliminate his political rival by ritual means and affirms his moral integrity in terms of his valuation of the common weal above the injunction of the god. However, Nanimgaebi legitimately interrogates this moral stance and appraises it as the priest's tragic evasion of his moral leadership:

Otagbu: (*moves to sit*) The stream can never flow backwards . . . (*sits*) Have you ever seen gold rust?

Nanim: Yes.

Otagbu: What is the colour of rusting gold?

Nanim: It is red. Red. Bloody.

Otagbu: Where did you see gold rust?

Nanim: Here.

Otagbu: When?

Nanim: Four years ago when I brought Nketa here. She was pregnant. Those stupid medical doctors had complicated the case. It was her seventh month of pregnancy. You, Otagburuagu removed the fully formed foetus.

Otagbu: Remember, I did not do it out of my own will. People persuaded me.

Nanim: But what matters is that you did it. You killed him.

Otagbu: (*stands*): No what matters is that I did not put a deaf ear to the voices of so many. Only an insane man would do that.

Nanim: But gold rusted You killed the little boy.

Otagbu: Don't annoy me. Don't [you] remember how you pleaded. For four hours. That girl would have died. She was panting to death. And bleeding too. You all besieged me and pelted me with pleas of please please please. One of the women you invited to beg told me to remove the child and save the mother instead of watching two souls die. What else could I do? I placed the root and she crossed it and in that cluster of plantain trees she ejected it. You were the midwife Nanimgaebi. Why do you now turn to accuse me? (*Colour* 36)

Nanimgaebi's insight is that morality is superior to compassion. The priest cannot shirk his implication in blood by evoking the quality of mercy. Otagburuagu's awareness of his victimhood is even keener in a moment of deep self-introspection after Nanimgaebi's virtual suicide: "A man stays in his house, practising his trade, a stranger walks in and forces him to do a thing against his will, against his conscience, against the rules of his trade, against the calling of his gods. He refuses. Then, the whole world begs him on What one man can fight the entire world? (*pause*) Now the deed is done and I have to bear the guilt alone" (*Colour* 44). However, he highlights his symbolic status to conceal his personal modesty and failings.

J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada calls Otagburuagu's story one of "a human tragedy involving honor, duty, obligation, and morality" and highlights the protagonist's vacillation "between the outright rejection of evil and accession to past evils which hound him" (517). Nanimgaebi's insistence on Otagburuagu's responsibility for the death of the foetus even when he spurred Otagburuagu on is meant to focus attention on the moral

implications of the priest's calling. Otagburuagu later acknowledges guilt even for Nanimgaebi's suicidal oath at the shrine and so sets this in relief: "Yes, I was supposed to be his conscience . . . Yes, I am the conscience of the people. I should not have let him swear" (*Colour* 44). The onset of madness is indicated by his conscience becoming a powerful accusatory voice, underscoring his failure to assume responsibility for public morality: "(*Distant voice (stage left)*) You killed him. You are supposed to be everybody's conscience. You are the bridge between the flesh and the spirit world" (*Colour* 45). Otagburuagu's tragedy is that his transcendent priesthood makes his contaminating association with Nanimgaebi a personal moral failure even as it paradoxically throws into sharp relief his status as a representative victim of communal guilt. Irobi makes an insightful choice in linking Otagburuagu's ruin to the destruction of a threatened pregnancy. This arises from his recognition of the poignancy of that pregnancy as a twofold symbol of liminality in being both an unborn child, and therefore in passage, and equally dying, and so in transition; it is thus emblematic of his protagonist's own self-violation and self-destruction.

Irobi's comments in the 1989 interview with Nengi Ilagha range from vitriolic castigations of government policies through a sober appraisal of the national educational system to insightful comments on the arts. He envisaged that the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) instituted by the General Ibrahim Babangida administration would be futile, incapable of strengthening the devalued national currency, ironically bringing to the boil dehumanising situations that invariably generate a revolution. Irobi recognised an older generation of writers like "Osundare, Ofeimun and Osofisan catalysing the creative industry with a sense of mission and vision, even if some of their works are largely exercises in intellectual or ideological masturbation" (11). He discerned a new generation of writers that should certainly include himself,

“still floundering for a mastery of the form and the needed spiritual integrity which sustains enduring art” (11). His appraisal of the influence of Chinweizu on younger Nigerian writers reverses the troika critics’ allegations against Soyinka and illuminates Irobi’s position in *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh*:

What has poisoned the creative stream of the younger generation and turned some of them into hack writers, hauling badly built bricks into the street of life in the name of poetry is Chinweizu’s phosphorescent sophisticated and misleading Afrocentric poetics which is largely a manifestation of one man’s ignorance of the nature of the creative process. What those young men do not know is that they might end up like their mentor—in the anus of literature. (11)

Irobi articulates his own ambition as a writer in the year in which his first creative work was published in a typically daring manner: “I would as a writer want to do for my generation what Soyinka, Achebe and Okigbo have done for their generation. In fact, I would like to write three of them out of literature, if that will be possible” (11). Some of the social urgency in his appraisal of the political and economic situation of the country finds a correspondence in his early drama especially in *Hangmen Also Die*. But in all three of the plays he published in 1989, there is some discernible artistic corollary in terms of a self-conscious striving to replicate demonstrable aesthetic effects in the work of Soyinka, Achebe, and Okigbo, thus reifying his canonisation of the three as the hegemonic faction of Nigerian literature.

Irobi’s essay “What Would Picasso Have Said? Fractured Narratives and Coherent Deformation in Contemporary African Literature” indicates some of the lessons he strove to learn from those three writers even early in his career, as well as basic aesthetic ideals deriving from the African heritage he learnt through their mediation.⁶ Irobi identifies as the

distinguishing attribute of African art metalingual configurations that, through visual distortions, stress the metaphysical dilemmas and transcendental powers of the human spirit. He remarks on how Picasso had transformed the tradition of realist European art by his incorporation of the fragmented iconography of traditional African art. Irobi discerns the same complex metalingual tendency found in African sculpture in indigenous African orature, music, and theatre and traces to it the occasional opacity found in the work of many modern African writers. Soyinka, Achebe, and Okigbo are central among Irobi's pantheon of African writers whose works embody this distinctive African literary chronotope even when that work is in English.

Irobi underscores the representative virtues of African sculpture that Picasso found inspiring: "They are iconic and magical. They have a sacred syntax which means that, as instruments of the spirit, they are functional in a religious sense and can thus be used for propitiation, meditation, healing and ritualistic purposes like initiations into cults of manhood. They have aesthetic value as utilitarian objects of beauty" (5). He identifies African sculptures as metalanguages compressing many disparate experiences into one aesthetic mould and compared the deployment of metalanguages to coherent deformation, which he defined as "the process whereby the formal, accepted structures of an art form are shattered by praxis, with the result that a new meaning emerges" (6-7). As an illustration of this process, Irobi identifies Picasso's work inspired by traditional African art as well as many African writers' transformation of both the English language and the concept of literature through the deployment of metalanguages as epistemological motifs and ontological landmarks, even when ostensibly writing in a European language. His example of metalingual discourse and coherent deformation is Okigbo's "priestly invocation and deployment of Igbo symbols such as white chalk, palm fronds, eggshells, Mother Idoto, the female

Igbo deity" (6). Irobi reads the dialogue between Ezeulu and Edogo in the episode in which the former remonstrates with the latter for carving deities against his advice as the "Igbo epistemology of sculpture as a ritual object" (14). Belonging as both do to the same Igbo cultural milieu, Irobi argues, the mask, as Achebe makes manifest through Ezeulu, is only a performative accessory in festival and ritual theatre, while a deity is a powerful votive object for worship. With regard to Soyinka, Irobi notes that his *Death and the King's Horseman* celebrates the complexity of Yoruba performance culture and metaphysical worldview and is, moreover, an allegory on the failure of African leadership:

Soyinka employs the metalanguage of a funeral dance as the vehicle for Elesin's, the protagonist, transition from life into death. Complementing the dance are funeral chants, songs, dirges, drum codes, and finally a transcendental hallucinatory poetry plucked as it were from the womb of speech, retaining in its lilt and lurch and lyricism a cumulative imagistic force which thunders on the mind like handfuls of earth thrown on a coffin's lid at a funeral. These indigenous elements though transliterated into English, still retain a vernacular Yoruba immanence as they propel the Horseman to *orun*, i.e. heaven, the abode of gods and ancestors. (11)

Irobi also notes how Achebe, Soyinka, and Okigbo appropriate proverbs from the communal repository to achieve a great diversity of semiotic, linguistic, philosophical, and theatrical effects.

Irobi's first published three plays and the course of his later career reveal, though, that the charming poetry laced with traditional wisdom and the resources of oral literature that he found enthralling in the work of Achebe, Soyinka, and Okigbo deepened his study and reverence of the spiritual depth of the cultural institutions and worldview that that poetry aspired to evoke. In Irobi's early career, the cultural material explored in

The Colour of Rusting Gold had offered him the greatest context for a revalidation of traditional ideals. It also gifted him with the necessary linguistic resources to enact, in Irobi's words, such "mesmerizing sorcery" with the English language in which the charms and spirit of the African language appropriated remained mysteriously alive. In the altercation between Otagburuagu and Nanimgaebi leading to the latter's mortal oath-swearing at the shrine, proverbs animate the tense verbal fencing between the two, with the language approaching the ideal that filled Irobi with delight in the works of the African writers he admired. The key figures generally transcend mere social banter and occasionally even rise to the virtually gnomic:

Nanim: . . . Look the bitch has eaten her puppy.
Otagburuagu can you be so treacherous?

Otagbu: (*calm, looks up*) Treachery?

Nanim: You promised to . . .

Otagbu: I never promised anything! [. . .]You are
fuming for a fight.

Nanim: If a fight will make you more sensible.

Otagbu: (*keeps the bowl*) It is like a dog barking at
a tiger. Yes, like a chick defying a kite. It is
like a goat bleating threats at a lion. Tell
me Nanimgaebi tell me . . . how many
hunters celebrate their first yams with the
meat of a tiger . . . Tell me (*stands charged*)

Nanim: (*cowed*) Is that why the aged trap should
blind its eyes to the hooves of antelopes
and yawn for the legs of men.

Otagbu: (*poking a finger*) Mind your words before
venom flows into my fangs.

Nanim: Your fangs are already buried in my flesh
(*looks himself over*) Can't you see?

Otagbu: You are the one who is blind. (*relaxes*)

Nanim: (*beaten*) All I ask is that the man who
planted the yam seeds into the ground

- should be ready to tend the tendrils.
 Otagbu: And the tendrils should be grateful.
 Nanim: I have always been grateful.
 Otagbu: You have not. You would not have tied a
 noose and asked me to try it and see if it
 fits the size of my neck. (*Colour* 32-33)

Nwachukwu-Agbada's comment on Irobi's language in *The Colour of Rusting Gold* is insightful: "Linguistically, the playwright strives to inject poetry and the lofty speech pattern of the Igbo milieu into the drama, sometimes to excellent effect" (517).⁷ He regards Otagburuagu's speech integrity as inviolate in his copious use of proverbs and imagery. Indeed, Irobi's translation of Igbo speech into a demonstrable variety of the Nigerian English idiolect is of course a crucial component of the aesthetics of the syncretic theatre he advocates.

Gold, *Frankincense and Myrrh*, *Hangmen Also Die*, and *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, as might be expected, do not always fully embody, even when they anticipate, the complex epistemological beliefs and theatrical conventions of indigenous festival and ritual performances that were to become the steadfast preoccupation of Irobi in his later work, both creative and theoretical. For beginning from the early 1990s, Irobi was absorbed in illuminating in his critical work the indigenous "cultural texts and phenomenological deposits" that by interacting with Western theories and practice have given rise both in Africa and the African diaspora to "hybridized and syncretised aesthetic infrastructures that interrogate the theologies of supremacy often associated with Whiteness and other manifestations of Western cultural and intellectual hegemony" ("What They Came With" 896). Irobi's own later drama often aims to demonstrate "how what really survived and have persisted are the significance, meaning, semiology, performance theories, ontological framework, and most important, functionality of these African-derived forms" ("What They Came With" 897).

Examining a common European and African phenomenological recognition of the centrality of the human body in the perception and signification of both physical and transcendent experience, Irobi characterises the ontology of most African cultures as primarily spiritual and discerns a consequent bodily incorporation of “habit memory” that creates and masters functional activities including sculpting and a variety of gestures sacred and profane. However, he locates the crucial function of the human body at a more complex metalingual system of communication that he denotes as the secondary level of modelling. Here, as Irobi avers, “African societies consciously fashion a corporeal semiology through which the body becomes the symbolic repository of transcendental and expressive as well as philosophical ideas associated with religion, worship, the divine, ritual ceremony, celebration, war, weddings, funerals, royalty, politics, and so on. Most of these ideas and concepts are structured and expressed through mime, music and dance” (“What They Came With” 899). Irobi consequently in adopting an essentially dance-drama structure integral to most Igbo ritual performances locates in mime, music, and dance transformative powers that range from the mystical, psychic, and therapeutic to the political, and his early plays reveal intimations of his recognition of mime, music, and dance as encoded texts and highlight the embryonic formation of these basic ideas.

The Colour of Rusting Gold incorporates a two-line elegiac propitiatory chant as well as a specialised dance as part of the rituals undertaken by members of the diviner-herbalist cult to divest Otagburuagu of his powers as he betrays his vows and is inflicted with madness. The only female member of the cult, Nmaju, on whose shoulder the lot to initiate the ritual of de-consecration falls, is enjoined by a colleague, Ogene:

Nmaju, you will dance a dance of discovery. Not a dance of

delivery. You are in the tiger's den. The tiger crouches in wait. His claws are bared. His fangs wait. So, do a gentle dance. Yes do a gentle dance. Or he will spit out morsels of your flesh that will stick inbetween his teeth . . . So do a gentle dance. Nmaju do a gentle dance. (*Colour* 55)

The music modulates from the elegiac to the single-beat, metaphoric, eerie tune of the windy night, and the dialogue that all through the episode is esoteric assumes an expected mystical dimension. The dialogue itself aims to underscore the predominant symbolism of music, as in the reference to the mad Otagburuagu as "the lost chord of the iron gong" (57). Blindfolded with a piece of black cloth, and embodying inscrutable silence, Nmaju, in her dangerous search for Otagburuagu's ritual "medicine pot," is guided by drum beats that reach their crescendo at the moment she attains mystical illumination: "*As if propelled Nmaju begins to grope. They change the beat. She goes to the fire place, shifts the ashes and brings out a tortoise shell, Ululations!*" (*Colour* 57-58).

In a pioneer study of entrancement in Nigerian theatre, Dapo Adelugba drew attention to the pervasiveness of possession in traditional African ritual and festival practice and highlighted the paramount role of music and dance in the attainment of the state of possession: "The possessed is consequently transformed into the essence of the god himself or herself, and during the trance, characterized by ritual sacrifices, incantations, music, song and dance, the possessed is capable of the prophet's sight, communicating with man as a first-person representative of the deity" (210). In the performance of possession, however, Adelugba discerns demonstrable theatricality and remarks on how the veracity and soulfulness of trance could enrich Nigerian theatre. Adelugba's exploratory observations on Soyinka's appropriations of possession in such differing plays as *Kongi's Harvest*, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, and *The Road* point in the direction of the great diversity of uses

ranging from the sensual through the political to the mystical that theatrical possession could be put to. Even then Adelugba was certain that Soyinka's practice only indicated "what can be done on a more ambitious scale by future dramatists on the African continent" (214). Acknowledging Soyinka as his inspiration with regard to indigenous African initiatory acting style, Irobi characteristically takes Soyinka's insights further.

In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi demonstrates his conviction that music is central to the achievement of that intensity of soulfulness associated with entrancement. He also stages the ideological disparity that is the substance of the action dramatised in the contrasts between the regal drumming and dancing that mark the controversial coronation of Erokosima and the fearful war song "Alagba fie fie" of the Suicide Squad that interrupts it. Associating material dispossession with mental possession, Irobi is intrigued by the complications of the rites of inspiration with the rituals of madness and recurrently foregrounds the apparent link between spiritual possession and sheer fury. He is painstaking in his description of the Suicide Squad's *performance* of terror as a macabre dance:

[The lights dim, a blue hue pervades. As the chant progresses it will go from amber to purple to blood red. This scene is choreographed.]

R.I.P: *(begins to glide)* But we understand the language of fear. We know its secret alphabets, its traffic signs, its magic spell over a city. We know how it feels when fear creeps into the ribs of a city and grips its heart, constricts its veins, congeals its blood, stops the rhythm of its heart beat [. . .] *(hideously)* We lurk in the dark and wait to wound. We hide like Death and clutch at your life. We crouch in ambush

and sniff like jackals. We sway (*they sway*)
 we swing (*they swing*) we pounce like apes
 (*they pounce*) and roll like dogs (*they roll*)
 and stand like snakes (*snake position*)
 hissing through our tongues. (*they hiss*) We
 are a brood of vipers.

Acid: We are desperadoes . . .

R.I.P: We strike like mambas (*they strike*) And
 leave on your flesh, the mark of our fangs,
 the sign of our venom, the insignia of our
 grief. We leave on your skin, in the
 language of your blood the anthem of our
 fury. (36-38)

Duruaku remarks on the “engaging trance-like atmosphere created by the images” in the above passages and traces the inspiration of “the hypnotic esoteric chants” to the characters’ indulgences, “their more charged marijuana-induced moments” (108,109).⁸ Obsessive indulgences or intoxications are of course diversionary flights rooted in a horror of reality and the desperation to assume a grandiose fantasised self-image. Typically, they are also sources of irrational behaviour and even acts of madness.⁹ Irobi’s theme in context is madness, not inspiration. In the Soyinka oeuvre, the possible model is the paranoid Kongi, protagonist of *Kongi’s Harvest*, at the peak of his frenzy “a demonic mass of sweat and foam at the lips” (*Kongi’s* 83), rather than Elesin, at the approach of death an oblivious pilgrim of passage. Irobi’s drama, like Soyinka’s, foregrounds the diverse dimensions of “entrancement.” Christopher Balme places *Kongi’s Harvest* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* at the opposite poles of the continuum of Soyinka’s treatment of possession: “Although Soyinka examined the inherent theatricality of spirit possession in earlier plays *Kongi’s Harvest* and *The Trials of Brother Jero* in a clearly satirical vein, and also in *The Road*, Elesin’s trance-dance is the most prolonged and serious examination of possession in

Soyinka's work" (216-17). In *Hangmen Also Die*, paranoia is Irobi's preoccupation and a *body* of seven youths completely possessed and ridden by fury is the demonstration-piece of his insight into the power of social dispossession to reduce its victims to mere fury and rage.

Especially in production, the fleeting deployment of music and dance in *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* both relieves the tedium of the interminable academic debate and advances the mythological component of Irobi's project that is rather obscured by his more highlighted satirical scheme. The historical troika critics' basic criticism of Soyinka's acclaimed interpreters, which Irobi repeats, is the interpreters' worrying failure to understand their exalted author and their criminal deification of him as a consequence of that ignorance. The pathos of their song and dance of ostensible victory is itself rooted in self-derision:

Nwogu: *(singing)* We borrow glory.
 Kariuka: By dancing with the great.
 Nwogu: We borrow glory.
 Kariuka: By standing with the great.
 Nwogu: We borrow glory.
 Kariuka: By singing with the great.
 Both: Even if we do not know the anguish of
 the lyrics,
 Even when we miss the dance steps,
 Even if we wobble with rubbery feet.
 Nwogu: We borrow glory.
 Kariuka: By grinning with the great.
 (They dance happily around Prof. Ogun
 who surveys them from his high stool.)
 Ogun: My interpreters.
 Both: We are the great interpreters.
 Ogun: Guardians of the hidden word.
 Both: We are guardians of the elusive word.
 (60-61)

The overarching image evoked is of an oracle or a deity and of suppliants engaged in a worshipful song and dance. The dominant religious tone of the panegyrics that proliferates throughout the episode even when intended to mock accentuates this image. Ogun is called "the high priest of our continental literature" (61), "The voice of the universe" (61), a "demi god" (61), "The modern reincarnation of an ancient god!" (62) and "Dionysius" (62). Irobi's theme is literary canonisation, and by linking it to myths of the messiah as in the troika critics' parody of the Magi's homage to Christ in the critics' lampoon of Soyinka (from which the play takes its title) and even more productively to cultic African religion, Irobi sets in relief the religious origins of the ideal.

In characterising Soyinka as Ogun, Irobi painstakingly appropriates the myth of the god to extend his fascinating exploration of mystical embodiment begun in *The Colour of Rusting Gold* in his focus on the enigmatic relationship between the priest and his acolyte. This forms a paradigm of his later appraisal of the relationships between a deity and his protégé and between the masker and the invoked and possessing spirit. Writing recently, both Ben Obumelu and Biodun Jeyifo have drawn attention to the limitations of Ogun as Muse and inspirer of revolutionary action. Obumelu cites Yoruba *ijala* poetry and *Odu Ifa* to identify Ogun as "an irate warrior god who delights in the blood even of his own men" and to note "Ogun's dirty habits" (33). Jeyifo discerns in Soyinka's portrait of Ogun in *A Dance of the Forest* an image of a malevolent and compromised Muse, given his implication in the death of Oremole, protégé of his rival deity, Eshuoro (60), and argues that Soyinka scholarship has not paid full attention to this image of Ogun in the writer's work. However, Ogun's paroxysms of anger in *Gold*, *Frankincense* and *Myrrh* are legendary:

(Dramatically Professor Ogun jumps down from the

high bar stool and advances menacingly towards the trio speaking effortlessly and in rage)

Ogun: Neo-tarzanists! Critical hypocrites! Traditional Tyrants. Literary hangmen wielding the bludgeon of destructive opportunism. Dare me! (*he advances*). Sway your critical sledge hammers over my head and head for Ogunian destruction. I said dare me. Dare me and reap a harvest of smouldering hair and mangled flesh. Ha-ha-ha-ha. (*a cannibal laughter*). A foolish destiny is staring three of you in the face. (36)

In the brawl between his interpreters and detractors at the close of the drama, Ogun (who had moments earlier ominously referred to the lot of the people of Ire) swoops on both foes and friends alike as Ogun the deity had done in myth at Ire. Irobi inscribes Ogun's frenzies of anger as the dark side of possession. The necessary discrimination of voices, that is, the distinction between vision and hallucination, between the oracular voice of the god and the dark vehement irruptions of unregenerate human nature, between liminality and lunacy, is central in Irobi's artistic projects. That fascination can be traced right to the beginning of Irobi's career.

In *The Colour of Rusting Gold*, the episode in which the mad Otagburuagu encounters his mad patient Oriakanjonuchichi shortly after killing his apprentice is hypnotic and sets in relief the discrepancy between self-image and reality that is typical of madness.¹⁰ The incremental repetitions create a haunting echo, giving the episode an eerie and incantatory effect. Each is hysterical and in terror recoils at the self's apprehension of a frightful self-image in the demented countenance and vision of the other. Otagburuagu's retention of awareness of the mystical bond between priest and acolyte and of the priest as

emblematic victim underlying his delusion of murder as suicide accentuates the slippages that characterise madness:

- Oriaka: (*spots Otagbu*) Who are you?
 Otagbu: Who are you?
 Oriaka: There is an insane grin on your lips.
 Otagbu: There is an insane grin on your lips.
 Oriaka: You are mad.
 Otagbu: You are mad.
 Oriaka: I am not.
 Otagbu: I am not.
 Oriaka: Why are you behaving so strangely?
 Otagbu: I have just killed myself.
 Oriaka: Killed yourself? What are you saying?
 Otagbu: What are you saying yourself?
 Oriaka: You are mad (*shrivels*)
 Otagbu: Okay, I am mad . . . You are sane I believe.
 Now, can you give one and a half reasons
 why you should be here, at this time of
 the night, in another man's house.
 Oriaka: My mother brought me here.
 Otagbu: To be cured of madness [. . .] (*Colour* 53)

In making the politician Nanimgaebi the source of Otagburuagu's temptations, Irobi indicts postcolonial Nigerian politics as a contagion and a source of defilement to a life of high-mindedness. Even in this early play, Irobi's two important themes are already manifest—Igbo metaphysics and Nigerian politics—and his horror at the insidious threat of the contamination of the former by the latter is obvious. The Western-type politician, just like the affluent Western-trained Dr Uba of the play's *The Lord is My Shepherd Hospital* who has been enriched through offering abortions, typifies the threat of Western capitalism to precontact ideals of the life of higher purpose represented by Otagburuagu as Irobi saw it. Irobi's search for transcendent ideals capable of regenerating

contemporary society always led him back to precolonial African life.

The Colour of Rusting Gold, *Hangmen Also Die*, and *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* in many important respects look forward to Irobi's later work in their absorbing study of traditional Igbo folk beliefs and institutions, in their appropriation of the dramaturgy of indigenous performances, in their preoccupation with the contradictions of postcolonial Nigerian politics, and in their enormous investment in diviners, visionaries, and artists, liminal figures simultaneously haunting the boundaries of many differing worlds, and condemned to remain in passage since they are incapable of finding more than a foothold in any particular world. For Irobi, as for Soyinka, this mystical edge-world is both a realm of wonders and of tragedy, and consequently of transformation. Irobi characterises that formlessness as clashing music and voices. Thus, the intriguing relationship between madness and genius, between possession and inspiration, and the paradoxical manifestations of basically the same species of energy in violence and in creativity fascinated Irobi throughout his career, and he thought that politics was a preeminent determining factor. Deploying Igbo cultural symbols to illuminate that metaphysical drama and to recreate it in historical terms, while retaining its compelling scaffolding and affectivity, gave Irobi challenging work to do in his later drama.

Chapter

3



Ritual and Mythological Recuperation in Irobi's Drama

Esiaba Irobi's adulation of Wole Soyinka as a model is easy to understand. Soyinka's iconic status in the development of African drama derives mainly from the crucial models he provided for interrogating the universality Europe had arrogated to its artistic paradigms as well as for the deployment of traditional African motifs. Regarding his work as basically a synthesis of Nigerian and Western traditions, Helen Gilbert identifies his crucial concerns as the exploration of the schism that Western theorists have constructed between ritual and theatre, and an ambivalent concept of martyrdom (*Postcolonial Plays* 1-2). Adebayo Williams's appraisal of Soyinka's significance is similarly anchored. Commenting on the creative use of ritual, Adebayo Williams remarks on the differing apprehension of ritual in Western societies beginning with the Enlightenment and in the emergent postcolonial cultures of the Third World, contending that the Eurocentric pejorative conception of ritual as a meaningless exercise is imperialistic and forcibly evacuates the space of the Other. Positing that such emptied spaces must be recontested to set in relief this subtle hegemonic assault, he draws attention to African writers

whose recourse to ritual is a refutation of the Western assumption of cultural superiority (67-68). Of all such writers, Williams considers Soyinka exemplary in his enlistment of ritual for ideological purposes as well as an organising principle (68-69).

Similarly, Eni-Jones Umuko identifies the "ritual icon" as one of the most enduring and indispensable keystones to the understanding of indigenous African theatre practice (1). He attributes this conviction to his experience of directing Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, which Umuko contends can only be presented authentically and faithfully as "a ritual for the stage" (17). Regarding as crucial Soyinka's pervasive influence on younger Nigerian dramatists as the consummate presenter of culture, Ezenwa Ohaeto notes the implementation of this cultural imperative in the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Emeka Nwabueze and Esiaba Irobi. He identifies as its unique virtue the appropriation of "nuggets of experience with wider implications for humanity" (219). Appropriating insights from Soyinka's formulations based on indigenous Yoruba theatre relevant to his own artistic goals, Irobi's inclination is always to articulate an alternative literary tradition and worldview by transforming Igbo cultural experience into paradigms potentially applicable to a wider humanity. Recuperating Igbo rituals and giving them contemporary relevance by translating them in terms of the political rituals of a modern nation state remains pivotal in Irobi's scheme.

Thus in Irobi's drama, contemporary society is mired in "crisis situations" that recreate the primordial ones from which ritual had evolved and held a promise of resolution.¹ Claiming for ritual an efficacy and a timeless sacred origin going back to ancestral memory, Irobi demonstrably makes the basis of his drama the dramaturgy of identifiable Igbo ritual performances—propitiatory, divinatory, funerary, regenerative rites. In traditional society motivated primarily by the dream

of life and plenitude—multiple births, bountiful harvests, a general renewal or rebirth of society—these ritual events, employing impressive stylised performances and poetic invocations, had equally provided an avenue for spectacle, dancing, conviviality. Rooted in all the tensions of a contemporary postcolonial society, and demonstrating an awareness of the dramatic conventions of the West, Irobi's drama invariably tends to the climactic ritual situation of communion, expiation, or celebration inscribed as a validation of ancient wisdom. Transforming ritual into drama, that is, a secular performance with a deep infusion of religious implication, Irobi aims indeed to highlight its sacredness and efficacy, to revive and revalidate the faith that nurtured and sustained ritual. Recuperating Igbo myths and occasionally recreating them to endorse his preferred ideological position, Irobi transforms the chief participants in the ritual event into towering symbolic figures in his drama of elemental forces. Irobi's drama, therefore, repeatedly recalls Soyinka's.

The paradigm for the *Ekpe* festival in *Nwokedi* is the communal expiation of guilt, and the sacrifice held annually in many African societies, especially at transitional moments (for example the eve of the new year) to placate the gods and renew the lease on life. In the past, as indicated by the play, among the Ngwa people of Igboland the setting of the play, as among many other (African) peoples, the preferred sacrifice was a human, usually the village idiot or the stranded and unwary stranger. Emefie Ikenga-Metuh explains that the scapegoat sacrifice was the norm in the Igbo society for the purification of entire communities. Ritually absolving the people of their sins by being dragged alive through every part of the village to cleanse it of all possible defilement, mocked and jeered at as an abomination, the body of the victim is eventually thrown into the evil forest or a river (13). According to Ikenga-Metuh: "In the substitutionary annual human sacrifice to cleanse the community, the community dies (in

the victim) at the end of the year in order to have a more wholesome life in the new year" (22).

Citing Sir James Frazer, however, to acknowledge that the sacrificial victim was a common fact of African life, Ben Obumselu notes the lack of imaginative exploitation of that theme in African folk literature. Obumselu suggests as a possible explanation for this the fact that the ritual proceedings were very probably so hedged round by irrational fears that they proved infertile soil for new literary invention. He seeks, therefore, in the imaginative world of *The Golden Bough* or even the Gospels and the intellectual milieu of the twentieth century the background of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, where the theme of ritual human sacrifice is central (56). Even while drawing on Igbo ritual experience, there are significant verbal echoes to suggest that in writing *Nwokedi Esiaba* Irobi himself may have sought for suggestions in Soyinka's work in his daring attempt to find relevance for a traditional festival, the Ekpe, in contemporary Nigerian society.

Irobi actually points to the heart of a central belief in Igbo traditional religious faith: the idea that communal deities are human creations instituted to perform certain functions for society. The implication of such a pragmatic concept of divinity is that only the gods survived that could demonstrate an ability to carry out the responsibilities assigned to them; the others were replaced. Commenting on this, M.J.C. Echeruo acknowledges that the Igbo

are a thoroughly iconoclastic people; that we keep our gods in our hearts and have only an appropriately respectful attitude to the circumstances that surround them. We respect the gods, but as the proverb says, we also expect the gods to respect us humans. We acknowledge the power of the gods, and cultivate that power; but when these gods consistently fail to prove themselves powerful, we reserve the right to discard them and seek out new gods. (*Ahamefuna* 18-19)

Reserving the powers to make and to destroy a god (or fetish),

and even to judge gods by human standards (thus ensuring the existence of alternative divinities) humans in traditional Igbo theology potentially constituted themselves into the highest powers. Echeruo identified Ala, the Earth goddess, as the only divinity beyond the capriciousness of Igbo people, noting that if the Igbo ever recognised a supreme divinity it certainly was Ala (*Ahamefuna* 18). Thus, the paradox was the simultaneous acknowledgment of divinity and a human selfhood that was infinitely portentous in its claims. Tragedy is inherent in the precarious negotiation of the fine edge between a robust sense of Self-Being that is potentially capable of making the human individual as self-reliant as can possibly be and an arrogant claim to divinity (see Echeruo's "Monsignor Theophilus"). Irobi adds to this picture in *Nwokedi* the insight that the medium who mediates between the people and the communal deity is himself the god-incarnate. Thus, the Ufo-bearer, who articulates the mystical relevance of the Ekpe festival, says:

[W]hen a people decide to create a god, they create a god in the image of the trade that sustains their lives [. . .] when a people mould a god, they also make a man the spirit of the god. And whenever the god is summoned, the spirit appears in the wake of the god . . . *Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi*: you are a spirit. We made you a spirit. But at this hour, as you cross that spill of blood, you will become a god. And like a god you will walk the earth. With your naked feet you will stomp the barren soil until it stirs with the greenness of a new life. (91)

But by narrowing down the frontiers between the divine and the human, Irobi creates the tragic situation in which the human easily overreaches the human limits. The Igbo concept of hubris is indeed epitomised in the plight of the proverbial gazelle which after overfeeding challenged his *chi* to a wrestling bout.² *Nwokedi*'s self-appraisal as superhuman accounts for his (mis)conception of heroism and his role in the scheme of ritual purgation in his community. However, the dialogue that

establishes the hereditary burden of the expiation of communal guilt as the lot of the Nwokedi family vividly recalls Soyinka's earlier work.

The expository exchange between Nwokedi and Habiba runs thus:

Nwokedi: I am the one empowered by the land to slaughter the sacrificial animal at the shrine of the gods and renew the strength of the earth with its blood.

Habiba: Can't someone else do that . . .

Nwokedi: Nobody else can. The courage that act requires reposes in our family. That is why we are called *Nwokedi*. (37)

In Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, Eman's father's revelation to the son of the family's hereditary election to a far more demanding redemptive vocation is similarly phrased: "Ours is a strong breed my son. It is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each year's evil for over twenty years" (*Short Plays* 103). He notes further, "Other men would rot and die doing this task year after year. It is strong medicine which only we can take. Our blood is strong like no other" (*Short Plays* 104-05). Where Soyinka chooses the title of his work from the first passage, Irobi finds his in the corresponding passage in *Nwokedi*. Indeed, the very expression "Nwokedi," an affirmation of masculine strength, is virtually an Igbo translation of "The Strong Breed." Moreover, Eman's reverie of his final encounter with the father is conceivably the immediate predecessor of Nwokedi's reverie of his encounter with Dafinone and the flashback on his experience as a buccaneer.

Yet the younger dramatist's vision (in spite of his apparent admiration of Soyinka's stagecraft) differs in some crucial respects from Soyinka's. While Soyinka is interested in the myth of the sacrificial victim as the saviour, Irobi is fascinated

by the career of the self-appointed reformer-saviour as the executioner of the guilty. Where, then, in both *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka's protagonists are carriers, in *Nwokedi* Irobi's protagonist wields a sharp knife. Soyinka foregrounds the modesty of our human nature, which inhibits our assumption of responsibilities for our communities, especially when the penalty for the expiation of communal guilt is the sacrifice of life itself. Irobi's hero, on the other hand, boasts of having worn out a whetstone sharpening his matchet. His world is the opposite of the victim's and, predictably, his enthusiasm mounts where Eman's and Elesin's founders. If, however, Irobi finds Soyinka instructive in the interpretation of ritual symbolism and action, the theatrical basis of his work remains the dramaturgy of Igbo ritual. In this regard, J.N. Amankulor offers invaluable documentations of the contemporary form of the Ekpe festival in Umuode-Nsulu in Ngwa Igboland (a people who "have retained the traditional and original attributes of *Ekpe*") (128).

Remarking on the potentials of the Ekpe festival as *dance-drama*, Amankulor has described it as action-packed, full of song and dance. He comments that the Ekpe itself is the seventh—the culmination and the climax—in a cycle of activities spanning the religious-ritual year of the people (114). Identifying the three dance movements of the Ekpe as the vehicles of plot advancement, and recognising the second as the climax, Amankulor comments on the role of the chief actor as a communal representative and provides the myth behind the ritual of goat decapitation, a potent symbolic gesture meant to reenact an ancient sacrifice: "When the actor takes the knife, he moves round and round the sacrificial goat tied to a peg on the sacrificial spot trying to make a decision. As in all traditional dance-drama and ritual the goings-on in his mind are those of the village. That he is re-enacting an ancient sacrifice by which the people recall an adventure by their forebears during which a human being was sacrificed to

appease the gods, is known by all" (122).

Amankulor identifies the mythical primal victim of sacrifice as a friend of the village who had to be immolated as a demonstration of loyalty to the village deity, *Alumerechi* (123). He discerns intense tragic moments in the entire experience and points to the "strange contradiction of pleasure through pain which is the basic element in tragic pleasure" (116). Amankulor's inclination in fact is to account for the comic elements in the contemporary Ekpe festival experience (seeking to de-emphasise the element of sacrifice and tragedy) in terms of the impact of Christianity (128). The postsacrifice dance movement known as the *Okoro-Oji* (very probably borrowed from another part of Igboland) is the embodiment of this trend. This movement of self-accusation and pathos, rooted no doubt in a consciousness of guilt arising from the ancient human sacrifice, reenacts the drama of the sacrifice just concluded. Amankulor notes that in the dance movement, the chorus leader intones:

I mere enyi – e [you betrayed a friend]
I mere enyi – e [you betrayed a friend]

To this the group replies:

I mere enyi [you betrayed a friend]
Eenyi mere enyi ya [Behold the friend who betrayed
his friend]
I mere enyi [You betrayed a friend]. (123)

Translating the song as "You did a friend / A friend did a friend" (123), Amankulor comments that "did" stands "for a bad turn meted to that unfortunate victim-friend when the village was confronted with a choice of loyalty. Singing and dancing here assume an ominously suppressed atmosphere" (123). This is an unlikely context to inspire the revival of human sacrifice.

The *Okoro-Oji* is the dance movement missing in *Nwokedi*.

The sacrifice of the goat, rather than awakening remorse for the primal human sacrifice, becomes indeed only a foreshadowing of the climactic decapitation of Nwokedi Snr and Arikpo, a heinous regression to the primordial act, especially as the victims are kindred. It is in the translation of a ritual festival marking the renewal of life in traditional society to contemporary Nigeria as an agent of purgation that *Nwokedi* seeks function and relevance. Recognising political corruption as the ailment that threatens the contemporary Nigerian society, Nwokedi and his age-grade, the Ekumeku, charged with the responsibility of renewing the face of the earth through the ritual sacrifice of a ram, regard the elimination of the corrupt politicians themselves as the proper purgation. If in the past they only participated in the symbolic cleansing of society, in the present they assume the practical responsibility for the immolation of those whose actions pollute the land. Nwokedi's physical brawls with the military at the National Youth Service Corps orientation camp in Bakalori, his grim quarrels with both his father and his brother-in-law, Senator Arikpo, and his eventual beheading of them as examples of the corrupt political class clearly demonstrate his commitment to revolutionary change. Like Irobi, Nwokedi is fascinated by the justification of murder as a theme of revolutionary philosophy; but unlike Nwokedi, the play *Nwokedi* is not morally insensitive.

However, Duruaku has noted that but for the infusion of the ritual idiom, *Nwokedi* would have been mere propaganda (91). He contends that though presented "as a necessarily ruthless crusader rather than a blood thirsty villain" (90), Nwokedi in reality "is a warped personality with a mission that cannot possibly solve anything" (91). Duruaku's conclusion is that Irobi exploits the grey edges of artistic freedom to rekindle the atavism in humankind, and moreover paints it as glorious; and that by shielding the protagonist's mindless bloodletting through a suspect return to traditional values and primeval rites, Irobi, rather than absolving Nwokedi

of guilt or diminishing the heinousness of his crime, indeed exalts anarchy and the survival of the strongest (92).

Irobi's exploration of Nwokedi's obsession with violence is indeed sustained. Nwokedi threatens to smash his mother's "head against the walls and watch [her] illiterate brains surge out like congealed milk" (68). He threatens his brother-in-law, Arikpo, in similar terms: "Soon, your skull will bounce on the surface of the earth like a coconut blown down by the wind . . . and your cunning brains will gush out on the ground like congealed milk" (72). Nwokedi recalls for his father with relish a gory dream in which he had beheaded the latter instead of the sacrificial ram, a feat for which his age-grade, the Ekumeku, lionised him: "They came in here, their eyes on fire. The hot-blood roiling in their veins. They came and carried me shoulder-high, a symbol of triumph. They bore me like a hero from myth to myth-centre of the village" (83-84). Nwokedi's lust for blood is shared by the Ekumeku and is indeed the substance of many of the Ekumeku's ritual songs, as well as their macabre drama with Arikpo:

OBIDIKE: (*seriously*) Senator, listen. When Time was young, we renewed the strength of the earth with the blood of men. Men like you . . .

ARIKPO: (*bitterly*) Me? Why me? Why always me?

UKADIKE: (*grips Arikpo by the neck*) Must be because of your size. Look at his neck. As fat as a castrated cow's.

AMADIKE: (*As he caresses Arikpo's neck with the sheathed matchet*) I can imagine this matchet at your throat . . .

UKADIKE: And you bleating like a funeral ram . . .

AMADIKE: While your blood froths in spurts . . .

OBIDIKE: To purge our desecrated earth . . . (20)

Irobi dedicates *Nwokedi* to "all the members of the Umuakwu Progressive Union / who not only initiated me into

the metaphysics / and ecstasies of the *EKPE* festival, / but have also stubbornly sustained a dying Igbo tradition" (iii). *Nwokedi* is clearly Irobi's contribution to the revival and sustenance of the Ekpe, "this annual ritual of the Ngwa people; a renewal of their agricultural season; a cosmic prayer for plenty; a cry for change!" (iii). Aware of the intrinsic limitations of all translations, Irobi refers to his translation of the Igbo songs used in *Nwokedi* as "detergent versions" lacking in the lyricism and evocative powers of the mythical original indigenous versions (*Nwokedi* 94). Consistent with the central ritual idiom of the play, these mainly ritual, propitiatory songs and war chants serve to evoke an enchanted and heroic time in which the valiant of heart lived and acted heroically, unencumbered by the taboos of everyday life. Thus, the ritual with its music obviously tends to disguise *Nwokedi*'s lust for blood as heroism.

Amankulor distinguishes the Ekpe (toned-marked low-low) festival in which all the community participates from the exclusively male secret society Ekpe (toned-marked high-low) also called *Okonko* in parts of Igboland and equally popular among the Efik and Annang (where it is known as Ekpe) (113). Irobi tends to conflate the festival and the secret society in his drama and in his scholarship, as is evident in his recognition of the Cuban Abakua society as an incarnation of the Ekpe secret cult and thus an illustration of his thesis on the survival patterns and adaptability of indigenous African institutions and art forms in the diaspora. However, Irobi chooses for the revolutionary age-grade the name of the historical secret organisation of young men among the West Niger or Ika Igbo that was the vanguard movement that led the armed resistance to British imperialism in that part of Igboland. Writing about this group, Adiele Afigbo says:

The term *Ekumeku* is untranslatable into English, but brings to mind such words as "invisible," "whirlwind," "devastating," "uncontrollable" and so on. The *Ekumeku* was able to obstruct the Niger Company's agents in the region

beyond Asaba with such success that the company was forced to take the field against them in 1898 and force the *Ekumeku* to accept some kind of peace settlement, which lasted until 1900 when the company was relieved of all political and administrative duties in Nigeria. (*Igbo* 342)

Irobi's induction into the Ekpe cult and his invocation of the cult as a judicial institution may well account for some of the egregious violence in his work.

The origin of the Ekpe secret cult in Igboland has been traced to the multiethnic environment inhabited by the Aro people of Arochukwu through whose agency it diffused to other Igbo communities. Originally found east of the Cross River, the society that played a central role in the political, judicial, and social life at Arochukwu spread first to Abiriba in the north and Bende in the west and even further, given the highly developed network of the Aro based on religious, economic, political, and settlement activities (Bentor 324). The Ekpe, like similar secret societies in precolonial Africa, performed executive and judicial roles, administered punishments on public offenders, enforced customs, and influenced and mobilised public opinion (Nwaka 188). Fascinated by the fundamental conception of the Ekpe as *a dance* in spite of its enormous influence in other crucial spheres of the lives of the societies where it operates, Bentor investigates at length its use of masks as a prime vehicle for articulating ambivalence. Contending that masks function as an interface between humans and the spirit world, Bentor suggests that masks are a cover-up for the limitations of rationality and especially "mediate between the perceptive gaps in human confrontation with death. They do so through the ambiguity inherent in masks and masked performances. Masking, as a phenomenon and as an activity, embodies features that allow it to convey or act out ambiguities" (331). But with the Ekpe and many other secret societies in Africa, the central masking tradition is also metonymic of the crucial facelessness necessary for cultic

ruthlessness and violence. In many ways a judicial institution in traditional society, the Ekpe was also on occasion a corrupting organ of control and coercion that resorted to violence to guarantee the interests of its members.³ Thus, the appeal to such an institution as a court of justice invariably creates an ethical crisis.

The flashback to Nwokedi's cultic activities as an undergraduate foregrounds his thirst for the macabre and the violent; it likewise extends Irobi's interest in cultic institutions and activities. Even among fellow cultists, with a reputation for gangsterism, Nwokedi's murder of Dafinone in what others regard as a game causes consternation and even condemnation. Significantly, too, Irobi in a stage direction describes Nwokedi's grimaces as he circles round Arikpo as "cannibalistic" (75); this is a surprising epithet by an author describing his own absolutes without irony. Irobi suggests that Nwokedi's traditional role in the ritual of communal expiation accounts partly for his inclination to violence. The symbolic appeal to terror as a ritual cleansing force for the community habituates him to bloodletting, as he seeks to appropriate as a political insight the paradigm of purgation through blood sacrifice. His twofold obsession with political renewal and the purgative power of (human) blood reaches neurotic proportions. His action, it is important to note, elicits lamentation from the folk whose cause he claims to champion. The play ends at a moment of choric condemnation of Nwokedi's blood lust. The point indeed is that Irobi depicts self-indulgence in uncoordinated incidents of violence as merely cathartic. In his September 2003 *Sunday Vanguard* interview, Irobi had noted: "What is needed is methodical and strategic insurrections. Insurrections aimed at change. Permanent change. What the Irgun Stern gang did in Israel to the British. What the Mau Mau did in Kenya" (49). Irobi also, presumably, both appropriates and transforms the Ngwa tradition he inherits. He does not equate the profound mystery of self-crucifixion (which he returns to in *Cemetery Road*) with the execution of

political criminals. *Nwokedi* makes its greatest impact when read as the tragedy of the overzealous reformer.

In his 1999 *Odenigbo* lecture, "Echi Di Ime: Taa Bu Gboo," Chinua Achebe drew attention to the anchorage of the Igbo concept of tragic pride partly in the self-esteem that manifests in the exaltation of excessive physical prowess because the ego desires to subject all to its will. Commenting on two different but related misunderstandings of the character of Okonkwo and his conception of that character in *Things Fall Apart* (one by an Igbo, the other by a German), Achebe noted that where the former had assumed that Okonkwo's unmindful adulation of chauvinism and excessive physical strength was the Igbo ideal, the latter considered Okonkwo the representative Igbo man. Achebe remarked that not only did both of them err, but that the great irony was that Okonkwo too fails to recognise his position in the Igbo scheme of things! Achebe then points to the Igbo ideal as a complex balance of masculine and feminine attributes:

Okonkwo sili ike, di uchu, na-agba mbo, na-ekwu eziokwu, kpata aku, chie echichi. Fa nine bu ife Igbo kwulu ka ana-eme. Oburo sooso na-okwulu etua, okwulu ya n'onu uda. Okonwo wee nu, wee mebe. Mana onwelu ife ozo Igbo takwunyelu ayi na nti. Osi na ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya; ayi wenata aka na egbe na mma, ayi akotona oja na ogene na aja-mbene na izu umunwanyi na ndi obi nlo. Okonkwo anuro ozia ezili na obele onu. Umuofia wee gbakuta ya azu mbosi otijli ukwu minye n'oku. (31)

Okonkwo is strong, devoted, hardworking, honest, wealthy, and has taken titles. All these are ideals affirmed by the Igbo. And not only did they affirm these, they affirmed them clamorously. Okonwo heard and heeded. But there was another thing that the Igbo whispered into our ears. They said that if something stands, another stands beside it to hold it firm; that we should de-emphasise the gun and the matchet; that we should not despise the flute and the iron gong and cock-and-bull stories and the frivolity of women's

talk and the soft-hearted. Okonwo did not hear this message delivered in a mellow voice. Umuofia abandoned him the day he broke his waist and dived into the fire. (My translation)

Achebe's observation is borne out by ancient Igbo wisdom inscribed in the people's folklore.

The insight of the Igbo story of the proverbial gazelle that overfed and challenged his chi to a mortal combat (which, by the way, Achebe highlights in *Things Fall Apart*) is worked out in greater length in the folk narrative, "Ojaadili." A matchless wrestler in Igbo folklore, Ojaadili conquers all the earth, human and animal kingdoms alike, and takes his awesome challenge to the land of spirits. There also he is equally victorious. But to be all-triumphant, he accepts the mortal challenge of his chi with predictable tragic consequences. An archetypal story of the human individual who aspires beyond the sane limits of mortality, the tale of Ojaadili also illustrates the Igbo belief that tragic pride is consistent with delusion, even with madness.

The Igbo cult of individual achievement through adventure or daring is eminently expressed in the concept of the *Ikenga* usually represented in a woodcarving. Cardinal Francis Arinze refers to it as the "personification of a man's strength of arm [which] has everything to do with his good fortune. It is a man's 'right hand' that leads him through thick and thin. The sword that *Ikenga* is represented as holding shows intruders what they can expect. *Ikenga* is personal to a man and its symbol is split at the person's funeral" (16). But the veneration of the individual will does not blind the Igbo to the superior divine role of chi in determining an individual's fortunes. This belief is expressed in the proverb "Onye bute chi ya uzo o gbagbuo onwe ya n'oso" (The one who places himself/herself before his/her chi runs himself/herself to death) and in the common Igbo name "Chibuzo" (Chi precedes). The inversion of the hierarchical Igbo binaries, "Chukwu na mmadu" (God and humans) and "mmuo na mmadu" (spirit and humans), sets

the limits of human presumptuousness. Irobi's protagonists are significantly variations on this paradigm: gifted but deluded—indeed neurotic—characters, contemplating themselves in the divine and invariably over-reaching themselves with tragic consequences. Significantly, accused of madness, Nwokedi responds with an exaltation of that state of mind: "The madness of every moment makes history" (Nwokedi 29).

Irobi's next two plays, *The Other Side of the Mask* and *The Fronded Circle*, were both published in 1999. The plays, unlike *Nwokedi*, are not staged against any specific Soyinkan anterior hypotext with which they exist in a critical relationship. But throughout, Soyinka's pattern of exploring the cultural thickets of the Yoruba remains an instructive point of departure. For both plays through different art forms—the former sculpture and the latter ritual music—attempt an illumination of the Igbo traditional mystical life as well as tragic view of life. *The Other Side of the Mask*, arguably Irobi's finest play, is a sustained meditation on art, its motivations and delights, its nature and demands, and the tribulations and travails as well as the triumphs of the artist. Like Nwokedi, a first-class graduate of Mass Communication, Irobi's sculptor-protagonist of *The Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike, is an intellectual, a university lecturer in fine arts. Through the elder brother Kamuche's rapturous recollection of Jamike's exceptional career, Irobi draws attention to his unusual academic brilliance. Irobi's thesis in most of his plays is the inevitable culmination in violence of the frustrated creative energy of even the most gifted individual; Nwokedi, Jamike, and the members of the Suicide Squad in *Hangmen Also Die* are, of course, his demonstration pieces: "[W]hen the creative juice is neglected, it percolates and ferments. And when it ferments, it evaporates into the vehicle of violence" (*Other Side* 61). Irobi's contention is that this fate is the singular lot of the talented Nigerian youth frustrated by "our contemporary epileptic political situation" (Nwokedi 94).

Irobi's many indications of Jamike's neurosis range from the simple and obvious to the oblique and subtle. References are made to his going "to lectures in a pair of shoes with different colours" (*Other Side* 12); to his sleeping "with his key outside, forgotten in the lock, the door wide open" (13); and to his talking to himself "[p]unching the air and slashing the wind [. . .] Muttering wicked imprecations at some bearded sentinel [. . .] Shouting and screaming at them [. . .] to give him his laurels" (14). Attention is also drawn to his vehement self-acclamation as a master (the name Jamike itself means "Exalt my greatness!") as well as his equation of dedication to art with religious worship and the winning of laurels with the attainment of salvation. There are also his anguished flights from ecstasy to suicidal despair. He declares to Professor Njemanze: "I am a genius. A neglected genius. Look at my work. Every piece of sculpture here is an ultimate masterpiece" (66). Yet in the next breath, Jamike is inconsolable and self-doubting: "I am neither a genius nor a great artist. I am neither acclaimed nor accepted. Only neglected" (67). Nevertheless, as is typical with him, his hysteria finds an issue yet again in arrogant self-celebration: "I am the next! The next! The very next! I am a genius. Everything I touch turns to gold. Everything I create is an ultimate masterpiece" (67). Jamike's gruesome demonstration to Professor Njemanze of the preeminence of the hands is a symptomatic exaltation of violence consistent with the uninhibited state of insanity in which he just took Animalu's life. Rejecting Jamike's contention that hands are the most awesome part of the human body, Njemanze suggests the eyes, which Jamike, however, dismisses as mere mirrors in the mind of what hands have been sent to accomplish. Jamike is relentless:

JAMIKE: (*towelling his hands* [after murdering
Animalu]) Prof., the hands are! Imagine
now that I wanted to strangle you. (*points*)
And it is dark. And on the walls you see a

silhouette of my hands groping towards
your neck (*he drops the towel and prowls
towards him, his hands quivering*) Towards
your throat, with my eyes tightly closed.
(*closes his eyes*) Closed, so that you cannot
see the glint of murder in my eyes. (*grips
his throat*) Neither can I see the horror
unfurling on your face . . .

NJEMANZE: (*flailing wildly*) Jamike! Jamike!

JAMIKE: (*tightens his grip*) . . . would you then
believe that human hands are the most
fearful parts of the human body?

NJEMANZE: (*choking*) I will! I will! (85)

And then there are outright lunatic ravings such as Jamike's eccentric explanation of his murder of Dr Animalu as a gesture towards transcendence: "I want to transcend life. As an artist, I must transcend life by creating life. But if the world will neither let me create life nor appreciate it even when I have created life, then I must destroy life. To destroy life also makes me transcend life" (55).

It is probably only to be expected, given that most of his central characters are academics, that in attempting to explore the problematic ancient kinship between inspiration and lunacy, Irobi should make knowledgeable allusions to European art history and artists. If Jamike suggests that the denial of recognition drives artists mad, Njemanze explains:

Artists . . . whether poets or painters or sculptors or musicians
. . . often go mad because they work very close to the core of
life . . . very close to dream and intuition and impulse . . .
That's why they go mad or have mental breakdowns more
often than other people. Their work is extremely hazardous
both to the body and the spirit. Remember Van Gogh . . .
(89)

Jamike himself is constrained repeatedly to appeal to Goya,

Picasso, Camus, Nietzsche, Ted Hughes, and Carl Jung among others to account for his temperament or his art. And, of course, in his self-appraisal as a master artist, he locates himself in the ranks of acclaimed European artists: "Michelangelo. Leonardo da Vinci. Van Gogh. Pablo Picasso" (13). Similarly, the contemplation on the role of art in society is rooted in the European tradition. Yet the kinship between genius and madness is an ancient one in Igbo thought and both are indeed in the domain of the same deity, Agwu.

As the repository of all arcane and esoteric knowledge, Agwu is associated with divination and inspiration; but as Agwu is equally linked with lunacy and aberrant behaviour, lunatics, deviants, heretics are considered to be under the influence of this deity. Regarded also as a primary cause of misfortunes, Agwu clearly is central in the Igbo conception of tragedy. While Irobi does not refer to this deity by name, he makes constant knowledgeable but oblique allusions to the influence. Considered rascally and mischievous, Agwu, like Ekwensu, the spirit of evil, is an interfering spirit force capable of frustrating the fulfilment of human ambitions. Jamike's anguished consternation at the source of the relentless futility that haunts his life is Irobi's poignant allusion to the malevolent forces capable of interfering with human destiny:

Why is it that every work I carve becomes a knife that laughs into the flesh of my life? Every song I sing becomes an arrow that turns back in flight to find the eternal target of my heart. What unforgivable evil is it that I chose a chisel as the instrument with which I will reshape the face of the world and leave it more beautiful than I found it? (*Other Side* 53)⁴

The Other Side of the Mask offers a profound interpretation of Igbo traditional conceptions of the relationship between the plastic arts, religion, and the mystical life, and between art and society; it also attempts to account for the travails of the artist by seeking to illuminate the mystical source of inspiration.

Irobi conceives of Jamike as the embodiment of the Igbo conception of the visionary artist as a priest and prophet.⁵ In the tradition of his grandfather and his father before him, Jamike is a sculptor. Thus, he necessarily also inherits the sacred responsibility of tending the family god, Amadioha. Jamike's appraisal of his role as an artist therefore transcends the physical realm: "An artist is a vortex of the forces and vibrations swirling all around his world. He digests life at both an empirical and metaphysical level" (49). His devotion to his calling is absolute and is thus characterised by fanatical religious zeal. He fasts for days before carving. Ziphora, his muse and the incarnation of the obsessive, single-minded artistic spirit, explains: "When he has fasted for about three days, without food and water mind you, his reflexes become sharper. His intuition deeper. His consciousness more visceral and his vision more urgent . . . yes, that is when his spirit takes flight and soars above the mundane, beyond the profane, into the profound, the sublime, into the realms of the sacred" (*Other Side* 11). Jamike himself locates his essential aspiration as an artist in the spiritual: "I am interested in the formation of souls. I am interested in the creation of a new world. I believe I am a spirit, my father's spirit, that is why I carve out of a spiritual reserve" (76). His account to Professor Njemanze of his travails in his painstaking gestures towards perfection indicates that his aspiration is clearly the attainment of the ideal forms:

O prof.; if I could tell you what it costs the body and the mind to wade the swamp towards the anus of the Sea just to scoop the clay for the moulding of these masterpieces. (*hysterically*) If only I could tell you what the skin endures as my palms and fingers delve into the clayey soil to redeem from the worms what belongs to man. If I could show you the blisters from the shells of the periwinkle, the conch, the hermit crab, the oyster, the mudskipper and the electric fish as I defy the crocodile to harvest from the earth what belongs to me. Prof., if I could present to you once again the tribulations of the true artist. (*Other Side* 63)

Jamike is perhaps justifiably mortified that such devotion fails to win him recognition and laurels. But then Irobi also draws attention to the distinction between the self-image and the reality, between self-torture and sacrifice. Moreover, he aims to reaffirm the ancient insight that a mortal's claims to the grandeur of the godhead are not only invariably tragic delusions but are often also indicative of lunacy. But to this theme he brings a peculiarly Igbo perspective.

Jamike's god, Amadioha, the Igbo god of thunder and lightning, epitomises divine inscrutability. Writing on this thunder-throwing god of the sky usually invoked as a deity of justice, Cardinal Arinze notes:

The spirit of thunder has widespread influence in Iboland and has such different local names as *Igwe*, *Kamalu* and *Ofufe*. Those struck by thunder are not mourned, a most serious censure among the social Ibos. Such people are believed to have received the just reward of their atrocities. The corpse is not carried into the house and sacrifices must be offered at the fatal spot. The most notorious thing about *Amadioha* is his grim policy of seizing all the possessions of its victim. (16)

N.S.S. Iwe concurs with Arinze, noting that Amadioha "is regarded in Igboland as a divinity of vengeance against the wicked and evildoers. Victims of *Amadioha* are as a rule not given a normal burial, and their possessions, especially movable property and personal effects, are either ritually alienated or publicly cast away as refuse. Some call *Amadioha* God's minister of Justice" (14). However, as Amadioha may be invoked only by the morally upright, caution and painstaking introspection are the sine qua non in the worship of the god since even delusions of innocence invariably prove fatal. Given the chasm between the limitations of the mortal condition and the disincarnate purity of the divine, the invocation of Amadioha remains danger-fraught. Pointing to this in his review of Isidore Diala's *The Pyre*, a play in which

Amadioha is an abiding presence, Afam Ebeogu observes: "In Igbo cosmology, anyone who is a victim of Amadioha's flaming thunder must have committed some form of abomination which must have attracted the wrath of this deity of contradictions who is adored but also dreaded by its worshippers; the most ardent worshipper of Amadioha could offend the god even by the very act of a blissful adoration" (1).

Represented in *The Other Side of the Mask* as "a small carving made of wood and copper" (20) with a "grisly face" (77) carved by Jamike's father (just as in *Nwokedi* where Nwokedi Snr makes his political associates take an oath on "an evil-looking juju effigy" (1) of Amadioha), Amadioha is invoked in Irobi's drama as the god of justice. Kamuche, who is reassured of Jamike's sanity on discovering that Jamike still tends the god, notes: "The god of justice. Amadioha! If solicited it can send thunder and lightning to one's enemies" (*Other Side* 20). Concerning Amadioha Jamike himself says, "It settles disputes and dispenses justice" through lightning (78). Expectedly, this is the god Jamike invokes to mediate between himself and the judges who for six years deny him the National Award for Sculpture. He tells Njemanze:

Prof, I mentioned your name, the names of the other judges and my own name before the incantations. So if I am wrong in my assertions about the quality of my works, I will die tonight. But if I am right, if the judges have used my genitals as a rope to tie me to the tether of failure, the judges will all die tonight. Including you Prof! (80)

Although Jamike acknowledges that since he was under possession he could not affirm with any certainty whether he mentioned Njemanze's name before the god, he remarks nonetheless that a deep-seated grievance will most likely find expression in a state of possession. That Jamike dies on the night in question and in his dying breath identifies himself as a victim of Amadioha would seem to indicate that he is wrong and the judges right. But then the self-indulgent Marxist,

Dr Animalu, dies the same night—though Jamike is behind the Amadioha mask that murders him. Jamike notes significantly that the black and yellow mask also carved by his father is for “tending Amadioha and doing his will” (81). Again, that Jamike wins a major international award where he has failed for six years to win the National Award for Sculpture seems to vindicate his claims to greatness and allegations of foul play on the part of the judges. Yet, notably, Njemanze acknowledges as a masterpiece the award-winning sculpture Jamike enters for the international competition. Presumably through these paradoxes, Irobi reaffirms the enigmatic, inscrutable nature traditionally ascribed to Amadioha. Yet *The Other Side of the Mask* actually enlarges and modifies the traditional Amadioha myth.

While the acclaim won by European master artists constitutes Jamike's measure of greatness in the artistic vocation, the Igbo veneration of the artist of religious artifacts is his paradigm of the artist's ultimate possible relevance to society: “[A] time there was when a sculptor had his place in society. When he was venerated. When he moulded the images of the god of his clan. When he, a mere artist, held captive, for one whole year, the garment of wood for the naked spirit of the festival of life. When he stood out among his fellow men and was revered” (*Other Side* 84). By the creation of a god, the artist presumably transcends the limitations of the mortal condition. Irobi also alludes to the distinction of the master artist's special privilege in participating in the highest form of art as sacrifice in Igboland: the creation of *Mbari* houses. Writing on this distinctive form of sacrifice among the Igbo, Cardinal Arinze notes:

These are peculiar buildings set up to avert an imminent disaster from an angry spirit [. . .] A dibia [diviner] is consulted. The elders make plans and communal labour is employed. Special people are selected and these dedicate about a year to the building. They live together under strict

laws. Famous artists are invited. The *Mbari* house when finished looks like a place of worship. It is dedicated, but after this, the aim is achieved and it is totally neglected and allowed to go to rack and ruin. (87) ⁶

Yet hounded persistently by the full terrors of an evil fate (and unlike Demoke in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*, the protégé of a protective deity), avatar of an enigmatic god whom he is to hold responsible for his death, Jamike is to apprehend self-immolation itself as both the perfection of his artistic vocation and the final sacrifice. But if suicide is the ultimate temptation to the person with a bad chi, holding the promise of a radical renegotiation of destiny, among the Igbo it is indeed the ultimate abomination, irredeemably tragic. When the Igbo say that instead of accepting a situation, they would rather hang, the aim is not to delineate suicide as a viable option: it is to evoke it as the unthinkable horror.

The intensity of the ending of *The Other Side of the Mask* arises in part from the fact that Jamike's dual but related roles as priest and artist coalesce and that their resolutions coincide. The expectation of Amadioha's verdict, of the outcome of the international art competition, and of the resolution of the grim battle between Elesie (and her promise of a normal life of conviviality) and Ziphora, all on the night of the ritual propitiatory sacrifice to Amadioha in which Jamike's role is again central: all these stretch the anxieties of the audience to the fullest. The point is that in the process, Irobi recreates the myth and the god, annexing the roles of Ala (the patroness of the arts) and Ahiajoku (the god of fertility) in Igbo cosmology.

In the tradition of Soyinka's interpretation of the Ogun myth, Irobi's inscriptions of the paradoxes of the Amadioha myth set in relief not only the god's destructive fury but also his creativity. Indeed, he brings the arts into the domain of the god. Jamike calls him "the god of carvers" (*Other Side* 77) and identifies him further as "The god that sends lightning to kill the evil spirits who inhabit the trees from which carvers hew

their wood" (77). In a state of possession at the approach of the moment of sacrifice, Jamike, moreover, apprehends the god as a fecundating deity: "It is sunset, and the arena has been swept by the feet of spirits and dancers. Tonight a god must stomp the earth until it is soft like the mud the carver uses to mould his mounds. Yes, the god will stomp the red earth until it bleeds like the throat of a murdered man [. . .]" (*Other Side* 82).

Mircea Eliade points out that as early as 2400 BC the bull and the thunderbolt were symbols connected with gods of the sky and weather (87). Commenting on the appearance of the Iranian deity Vrthraghana to Zarathustra as a bull, a stallion, a ram, a he-goat, and a boar, Eliade cites Benveniste and Renou to indicate that these were all symbols of the male and combative spirit and of the elementary forces of the blood (86). The association in Igbo cosmology between Amadioha and the ram is twofold. Himself imagined as a white ram, Amadioha's proper and preferred offering is also a ram. Yet, typically, Irobi's ideal sacrificial victim is a man. Jamike envisions human sacrifice, where the blood of the immolated victim moistens the creation clay of the artist and is also food for him:

This night, dancing must invade the arena. This night the god must dance. He must dance in the centre of the circle. (*lyrically, reminiscing*) yes, silently the village will form a circle for there is a magic in circles. (*pause*) In the centre, there will be a man, bound hand and feet. The edge of the glinting blade will know the strength of the flesh! After, his blood will be mingled with the earth and the clay and the yam for the tonsured sculptors. At midnight, their hands weighted by the sacred clay, they will sneak into the Mbari hut to mould images in honour of *Ala*: Mother Earth. (83)

Yet in Irobi's universe, *Ala*, the Earth goddess, feminine, benign, and attaching the highest premium to the sanctity of human life, cannot be the supreme deity. For a writer committed to violent revolution and the destruction of the (politically) guilty,

the myth of Amadioha is indeed a divine boon. The point, however, is that by annexing the realms of other Igbo deities to arrogate supremacy to Amadioha, Irobi engages in a radical recreation of Igbo cosmology. Noting the historical challenge to the supremacy of the Earth goddess, *Ala*, by the establishment in Umunoha (in present Imo State of Nigeria) of a sky divinity, *Igwe ka ala*, Echeruo comments:

Igwe ka ala was quite simply not only a devilish sect but a heretical one. Its very name was a daring—a consciously daring—challenge to the supreme deity of the Igbo people. This cult placed *Igwe* above *Ala*, and claimed him as supreme. To propose that was in itself an abomination, that is to say, a defilement of the Earth, *imeru ala*. In short, Umunneora and *Igwe ka ala* must be seen in the history of our institutions as a phenomenon which came closest to setting up a god cult above that of *Ala* herself, the ultimate sanction to morals. (19-20)

The artist is, of course, not obliged to subscribe to his people's worldview. But for an artist apparently devoted to the resuscitation of folk ways, the boundaries between ascertainable cultural values and iconoclastic artistic projections should be clearly marked, especially for a people some of whose institutions are mired in a crisis of identity.

Soyinka's attestation of the validity of the Yoruba worldview in *Death and the King's Horseman* receives a special boost in the character of Olunde. If Iyaloja and the Praise Singer elect for the sustenance and continuity of the only world they know, Olunde consciously chooses that world fully aware of other traditions. Trained as a medical student to valorise the scientific outlook, he nonetheless demonstrates the authenticity of a mythical worldview; brought up to preserve life, he sacrifices his own for the spiritual wellbeing of his community. His experience of Europe and the European value system, rather than causing him to reject his cultural background, serves the primary function of leading him to appreciate the greatness of

his own Yoruba culture. Irobi makes similar use of the academic background of his major characters.

Nwokedi and Jamike are not illiterate tribesmen with an uncritical allegiance to tradition. On the contrary, exposure to Western education clarifies and strengthens each protagonist's appreciation of the significance of ritual and tradition. To Professor Njemanze's claim that Amadioha is a disembodied godhead towards whom his appropriate attitude as an intellectual can only be scepticism, Jamike responds that Amadioha is a virile, potent god who defies intellectuality. By signs and wonders he awakens holy terror in Njemanze. At the heart of the solemnity of divination, in the hands of the true dibia an efficacious ritual capable of connecting with the spirit world, the Igbo discern intense drama. All the special effects, costuming, chalk marks on (left) eyebrow, ringing ankle bells, dramatic behaviour, esoteric incantations, when not contributing to the realisation of the mystical experience but aimed instead at impressing and compelling the client/audience to experience awe are referred to as *anwanse*, a show, spectacle. Irobi's Jamike is a true practitioner both of the mysticism of divination and of its dramaturgy. Similarly, by his anecdote about the four educated young men who abandon at their mortal peril the family god, *Osisiogu*, handed over to them by their illiterate father, Jamike seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of traditional religious ritual. In *The Fronded Circle*, through the character of Dr Gilbert Onwutuebe, Irobi contends that the educated African's inexcusable alienation from the tradition of his people amounts to *ngahe ukwu*, a tragic misstep.

Nwokedi and Jamike even in their failures and in spite of their excesses still retain a measure of the affection of the audience because both aspire to worthwhile human ideals, one an egalitarian society, the other human acclaim; each, moreover, is great though flawed. The Igbo saying "O mewere ma chi ekweghi, onye uta atana ya" (One whose aspiration is frustrated by his chi hardly deserves any blame), though it

certainly encourages no presumption beyond the limits of humankind, clearly excludes sympathy for aspirations that are in contrast to the values of society. In *The Fronded Circle*, Onwutuebe's dread of death and futile gestures towards immortality, just like Onwudinulo's acquisitiveness, fall into this latter category. These themes are ancient and, moreover, common in the literatures of diverse peoples and generations. However, the ritual idiom through which Irobi explores them is deeply rooted in traditional Igbo beliefs.

Okwu's revelation to Uka in the expository scene is the working of the ritual through which Onwutuebe attempts to insulate himself against death: "[A] man buries his head as a protective charm against death. It is a powerful medicine. It lets the man swop his age (sic) life with the lives of other men especially . . . his kith and kin" (*Fronded Circle* 3).⁷ Nwannediya's account of the uncanny circumstances of the drowning of her youngest son, Ndubuisi, and the even more mysterious disappearances of his four elder brothers reaffirms Okwu's view: "[F]our of them disappear when their father is ill. Whenever he is on his sick bed they disappear. He calls them to his sick bed and later they disappear" (14). Anguished, archetypal mother of bereavement and sorrows, Nwannediya, referred to several times simply as "mother" or "mother of men" and also likened to the bereaved and inconsolable Rachel of the Bible, loses five sons, has a daughter, Kelechi, in the pangs of childbirth who cannot bring forth her baby (boy) unless Onwutuebe breathes his last, and is also on the brink of losing another young man, Gilbert, who used to call her mother. She is thus uniquely placed to articulate the course of the natural cycle and the cultural norms that Onwutuebe violates:

Our people say . . . when a man has made his will . . . after a man has shared out his farms among his wives and his yams among his sons . . . after a man has boasted about his life and has seen the end of his road . . . if Death refuses to come, the man goes out in search of Death . . . But Onwutuebe

will not! (*The drums, as if in sympathy, pound sombrely*)
 Our people say . . . when a vain and wanton moon dances
 out late into [the] arena of the sky, it shines its brightest
 before the twilight hour and then disappears just to rid her
 face of shame. But Onwutuebe has no shame. (*The drums
 punctuate her painful singsong*). (15)

With an eye on the family inheritance, Onwudinulo, by secretly unearthing the pot of charms that has to be neutralised to release Onwutuebe's spirit from his disintegrating body, exploits Gilbert's ignorance and lures him to his death on the *Ese* drum, by making him dance to its beats that are forbidden to the culturally unaccomplished. In a trance and oblivious of Onwutuebe's repeatedly shouted warnings, Gilbert draws attention to consanguinity as the mortal link, but remains blind to the implications of his words:

The tiger is a feline. The lion is a feline. The hyena is nothing but a forest dog. The monkey is an ape like the gorilla. The little chick becomes the hen, and the puppy the bitch. It is the same string and the same blood. The same umbilical cord and same womb. It is the same Erim . . . Onwutuebe we are one. (*FronDED Circle* 68-69)

Married to a black American medical doctor, and with a doctorate in musicology, Gilbert retains only a scholarly ethnographic interest in his indigenous culture. This is treated as the tragic arrogance that seals his fate, as Onwudinulo indicates: "He is an outsider. A total outsider. He lived in America for twenty years. He knows no tradition and no customs. He understands no proverbs. He cannot even interpret the message of the drums" (*FronDED Circle* 50). Later, with Gilbert already in a state of trance, Onwudinulo highlights the comparative shallowness of Gilbert's great Western knowledge, considering the moment of his self-estrangement from his roots the symbolic moment of his death: "When a man wanders away from his roots he becomes a ghost. The blind bat that flies into

a witch's pot has sealed its fate. The tortoise carries a world of wisdom in its shell yet it does not know how to climb a tree. Afonne Onwutuebe, the crab may wade the mighty ocean but it ends up in the soup pot of a woman" (65).

Irobi's revelation in *The Fronded Circle* is the seriousness of "play" in a rite of passage. As the dialectic in the drama is predicated on the willingness of Afonne, the Western-trained musicologist alienated from his Igbo roots, to approach a rite of passage as "mock ritual," that is, as imitation, and the typical Igbo conception of such a rite as serious, Irobi sets in relief distinctions between two views of performance: mimetic and nonmimetic or the representational and the presentational. Fascinated by the ceremony associated with the rite, and the presence of music, Afonne fails to recognise the critical process of cultural canonisation and to distinguish between praise poetry and the sober public testament to a life of achievements made on oath. Music/dance, typically at the core of Irobi's drama, in this play is privileged as both the basic metaphor through which he illuminates the Igbo attitude towards life and death and the accomplishments that culturally make life a worthwhile experience and a door of passage itself.

By denigrating his people as "superstitious" and their rituals as "primitive" (52), Gilbert breaks a taboo that has to do with life and death by dancing to the Ese: in symbolic terms, he, too, is like the proverbial gazelle challenging his chi to a mortal battle. With a doctorate in European musicology but ignorant in folk music and ways, married but with no child, Afonne has no credentials to participate in the ritual declamations of the Ese and steps on the sacred drum with fatal consequences. In both Onwutuebe and Gilbert, Onwudinulo identifies self-destructive and tragic arrogance: "Our people say, when a drum sounds too loud we tell it what wood it is made of, we tell it who carved it, what implements were used, we also tell the drum what its end will be; whether it will rot away or blaze to embers in an inferno of flames" (71). (Interestingly, a

variant of the proverb substitutes a “proud god” for a “loud drum”!)

In his trance, Gilbert envisions the natural regenerative cycle:

The seed is the seedling, the seedling is the plant. The plant is the tree, the tree is its branches. Its branches are its leaves and its leaves bear the flowers, the flowers bear the fruits, the fruits ripen and fall. They fall and become seeds, the seeds grow into seedlings and seedlings into trees. This is the spiral of life. This is the cycle of life. This is the journey of our soul; the road from life to death and from death to life again. This is the mystery of the world – It is the rhythm of our souls. (*FronDED Circle* 69)

Gilbert condemns himself (through the metaphor of plant regeneration) in his espousal of the natural progression of life to death and rebirth that is the Igbo/African paradigm of the immortality of the human spirit. The reason is Irobi's conflation of the human and vegetative cycles of renewal with the immortality of cultural life, which thus makes Onwutuebe's attempt to inhibit the rhythm of nature consistent with Gilbert's rupture of the cultural cycle, not by his exposure to a new tradition but by his wilful and arrogant cultural suicide. His tabooed self-exclusion from his roots and consequent self-elevation above his people and the mores he enunciates make him a threat to that cycle. Gilbert approaches a ritual of transition as a “mock-funeral” dance, that is, as drama, while Irobi aims to recreate ritual in its primordial religious state. Thus, words become incantatory and reestablish their kinship with magic, and gestures, charged with the deepest conceivable consequence, become primal forces. Therefore, if the splitting of the Ikenga is symbolic of the death of its owner, its fall from Gilbert's hand coincides with his and Onwutuebe's death. The point is that underlying Irobi's appropriation of traditional Igbo rituals as drama is an obvious attempt at a validation of

folkways and the religious truths of rituals. That the schemes of Onwutuebe on the one hand and those of Onwudinulo and Diegwu his collaborator on the other are frustrated is, therefore, also only to be expected: their actions are aberrations of societal norms. But while the three illustrate the self-defeating processes of the abuse of ritual, Gilbert's own experience equally reveals the grim dangers of treating rituals as inefficacious. In *The Fronded Circle*, Irobi transforms what is a rite of passage partly into a propitiatory rite and, by presenting cultural alienation as mortal, turns into a tragedy a grandiose elemental drama aimed at celebrating life as an experience of value in spite of death. Given that Irobi's central preoccupation has been with the ritual expiation of communal guilt for the regeneration of society, the presentation of the Gilbert/Onwutuebe death as propitiatory is crucial for his scheme. By the act of the Gilbert/Onwutuebe confession paid for with life itself, the curse of an era is expiated and the future made possible. Thus, in the wake of the deaths, that future, embodied in Kelechi's baby boy, is born; the stage direction reads: "*Suddenly a baby's cry pierces the tragic air*" (*Fronded Circle* 72). Irobi's abiding theme is the role of ritual in the rebirth of society.

Appraising the dramatic potentials of the Ekpe festival in 1981, Amankulor had enthusiastically declared:

From the drama-theatre development point of view, *Ekpe* contains the same germs which housed the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. What remains to raise it to the Aeschylean level of drama is a reconstruction of its dialogue to provide for greater communication between the chorus and the chief actor. The idea of the chorus is present in *Ekpe* and it does the same function of communal representation. (127)

Similarly, commenting on the fourth ceremony of the Ekpe cycle, *Ogbom*, Amankulor notes its possession of basic dramatic elements—good music, song, dancing, gorgeous costuming, mimetic action—but remarks that "*Ogbom* has not passed

through the transition necessary for it to become drama because dialogue and word sequence remain merely repetitive and unelevated beyond the sphere of traditional ritual" (114). Amankulor appreciates the fact that, given cultural distinctions, the evolution of ritual into drama among the Igbo may well have to differ from the Greek model, but proclaims the enormous dramatic potentials of religion and ritual though they had been originally designed to solve practical problems by initiating a state of rapport between the creator and the created. In this regard, the Ekpe is especially dear in Amankulor's heart: "Through its media of song and dance, great drama could be forged" (128). A decade after, in 1991, *Nwokedi* was published.

Esiaba Irobi, like Amankulor himself from Ngwa in Igboland, in writing *Nwokedi* demonstrates his apprehension of the dramatic potentials of Ekpe as dance-drama as well as its dramatic limits.⁸ The traditional festival was an inspiration to him not only in terms of structure and dramaturgy, but also in characterisation and costuming. Writing on the *ufo*-bearer in the Ekpe festival, Amankulor notes: "The *ufo*-bearer carries a magical concoction believed to destroy the power of charms. He guards against any foul deeds or intentions by any member of the audience. His costume consists of tattered rags and he smears his body with charcoal. A real devil-incarnate!" (126). Irobi's character, Ufo-bearer, in *Nwokedi* is virtually indistinguishable: "*He is smeared all over with charcoal. In his hands is a smoking pot*" (38). But working also in full awareness of the dramatic traditions of the West in which dialogue rather than incidental speech is crucial to the theatrical experience, Irobi creates new roles for the Ufo-bearer beyond mere provision of splendid spectacle by giving him a pivotal role in the scheme of the enunciation of the symbolism and significance of ritual action. Keeping an appropriately open creative relationship with the Western dramatic tradition as in his creation of an evocative and poetic, if occasionally

bombastic dialogue, Irobi's drama nonetheless contests the European hegemonic, given the worldview his drama projects and the dramaturgy it advances.

In a passionate defence of Echeruo's postulations on Igbo ritual, Ogonna Agu contends that in privileging Western dramatic paradigms, Echeruo disregards a strong call for a culture-authenticating status for African drama and advocates instead a culturally dynamic attitude towards myth as a source for drama. Highlighting the implication of Echeruo's proposition for contemporary Igbo drama, Agu indeed illuminates Irobi's imaginative procedures: "It means, therefore, that in adopting it as a method of obtaining materials, creative thinkers and artists can use it to develop new myths based on their own peculiar circumstances. It may even be possible for these writers to reinterpret the cosmological outlook of the people, expand it, and give it a historical or secular base" (5). Irobi clearly exemplifies this trend. His plays do not dramatise specific changeless myths subsumed in Igbo ritual, an alleged finished artistic product in its own right. His inclination is rather to appropriate Igbo ritual as basic source material for enunciating a secular vision of contemporary society, as Echeruo would suggest.

Recreating in terms of contemporary experience situations in which ritual had cogency, and treating myths as malleable narratives capable of authorising an ideological position, his attempts to expand Igbo ritual into contemporary (Nigerian) life are significantly marked by a deep belief in the religious efficacy of ritual. Enekwe contends that a "ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency" (155). Irobi's theatre interrogates this by its simultaneous attempts to transpose ritual on stage and to remain a house of faith in which the ceremony of drama not only provides spectacle and entertainment but also aims to resolve practical problems in society: an ideological resolution of the political impasse that

has characterised the postcolonial state. Thus, the bond between the sacred and the secular is still very strong. The stage direction that dwells on Jamike's invocation of Amadioha in *The Other Side of the Mask* reveals the playwright's own dread before the sacred: "He roots out an egg from a corner, swings it round his head seven times, and over the wooden effigy. Dons his former mask and begins to mutter incantations which the playwright cannot put down here for fear of the repercussions of sacrilege (sic)" (78). In *The Fronded Circle*, Reverend Akwarandu and his congregation are mocked and their prayers prove ineffectual before Onwutuebe's spell. Irobi ascribes primacy as well as supremacy to ritual over institutionalised religions, or, at any rate, self-delusions to spiritual power of a latter-day Christian sect. Irobi's work of the preponderant appropriation and validation of ritual exists in a polemical opposition to the authorised European worldview. Yet, remarkably, Irobi strives to sustain the traditional ritual purity and dread associated with the invocation of the gods and even incantations sacred to them while daring to recreate the deities themselves as well as the cosmological framework that guaranteed faith in their worship. In reality, he cultivates and harnesses the ancient potency ascribed to ritual to authenticate a new secular vision in his necessarily ontologically different kind of performance. His expansion of ritual into life and giving a secular base to that life is indeed marked by an iconoclastic projection of traditional Igbo paradigms in order to facilitate secular projects.

Irobi is obsessed with the possibility of the regeneration of a society labouring under the burden of guilt. The actions of *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of a Mask*, and *The Fronded Circle* therefore typically take place at a moment of transition, December 31, a more precise modern indication of what was a more poetic awareness of the sense of an ending and pattern of renewal. Like Soyinka, Irobi envisages a pattern of ritual purgation of communal guilt for the rebirth of society, which

demands suffering and sacrifice. If, however, Soyinka exalts the ideal of martyrdom, Irobi is preoccupied with the efficacy of ritual human sacrifice for the atonement of communal guilt. In transforming ritual into drama, he retains its full religious associations and naturally subjects his material to a pattern of interpretation that suits his temperament and his aesthetic convictions. Yet in the changed circumstances of Nigerian life, Irobi's passionate espousal of the political relevance of ritual sacrifice would seem increasingly atavistic and criminalised even when the victim is guilty except, of course, when appropriately accepted as *symbolic* thinking. The attempt to seek the origins of and possibly the justification for (revolutionary) violence in primordial ritual human sacrifice and ancient myths about the gods can hardly avoid implication in mystification. His true achievement consists in his reclamation of a much-maligned African heritage as an emblematic motif. Moreover, like Soyinka, Irobi takes us back to the origins of drama in ritual.

Tracing the origins of Greek tragedy to the rituals that marked the Dionysian festivals, Robert Luyster dwells in detail on the rites performed by the female worshipers of the deity, the Maenads, and remarks: "Finally, at the height of their frenzy, the Maenads converged upon a calf or kid, tearing it apart bare-handed and devouring the raw flesh. It was whispered that in days gone by the victims had been human" (44). Indicating, though, that Dionysos was paradoxically both the slayer and the slain in the ritual, Luyster discerns in the god's experience of being rejected and despised "the paradigm of all tragic history," explaining that this "is the stuff of which Greek tragedy came to be compounded: the inevitable suffering and death of a noble being in the interests of a greater life" (48). In his important study of tragedy, Terry Eagleton similarly inscribes the idea of suffering in the heart of the tragic experience:

[W]here tragedy is concerned, the question of universality cannot be side-stepped by a glib particularism. In one sense, to be sure, all tragedies are specific: there are tragedies of particular peoples and genders, of nations and social groups [. . .] And none of these experiences is abstractly exchangeable with the others. They have no shared essence, other than the fact of suffering. But suffering is a mightily powerful language to share in common, one in which many diverse life-forms can strike up a dialogue. It is a communality of meaning. (*Sweet* xvi)

Yet it is conceivable that the cultural symbols through which we attempt to express this experience could enhance or diminish the urgency of its meaning to varying audiences. In identifying the culturally representative Sango, Lear, and Oedipus as prototypes of the tragic experience, Soyinka inscribes that vale of soulmaking as a truly *human* thoroughfare. Irobi advances this project.

Irobi's interaction with Soyinka is invariably an appropriation of a formulation rooted in a specific African culture, the Yoruba, in terms of his innovative interpretation of his own Igbo background. He leads us through the enchanted atmosphere of Igbo cosmology (which he occasionally recreates) to illuminate an authentic vision of tragedy which, inevitably accounting for typically *human* suffering and greatness, in essentials often reaffirms other known paradigms. His work enhances with particular urgency our apprehension of the often tragic gulf to be negotiated and traversed in the complex dialectic between the individual's will and ambition, on the one hand, and the mysterious disposition of *chi* on the other. Irobi's innovativeness is equally magnificently demonstrated in making the dramaturgy of traditional Igbo performances the basis of his drama.

Chapter

4



Nsukka to Leeds: Irobi's Relocation and Reconfiguration of the Postcolonial Stage

Irobi's 2010 Nigeria LNG Literature Prize award-winning play, *Cemetery Road*, was a turning point in his career as a dramatist. Hitherto primarily concerned with the failures and inadequacies of the postcolony and the possibility of appropriating indigenous purification rituals and the mores they sacramentally enacted as paradigms of revolutionary change, in *Cemetery Road* he began the deployment of postcolonial discourse in his engagement with the travails of the postcolony. Thus, if in his previous work Irobi's scope was the Nigerian nation, in *Cemetery Road*, he focuses on the aberrations of military dictatorship in Nigeria and gestures towards a more comprehensive postcolonial context in which the African and the African diasporic experience is only a crucial point of departure. Furthermore, in *Cemetery Road* for the first time, European characters make an appearance in Irobi's drama as his female characters also assume more pivotal roles. *Cemetery Road* equally marked the beginning in Irobi's career of a more playful experimentation with theatricality, a deliberate playing

with the idea of *playing* and appropriating multiple media as resources of the contemporary stage. Some of these concerns and practices were to be consolidated in Irobi's later plays, *Sycorax* and the yet unpublished *I am the Woodpecker*.

Obviously, the decade that passed between the publication of *The Other Side of the Mask* and *The Fronded Circle*, on the one hand, and *Cemetery Road*, on the other, and Irobi's relocation in 1989 from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka to Sheffield University in the United Kingdom on a British and Commonwealth Office fellowship would seem to account for some of these developments in his art. His scholarly engagement with articulating a theory of indigenous African and African diasporic performance, his virtual fixation with theatricality and repeated citation of Richard Schechner and his bitter experience of racism in the United Kingdom provide tantalising clues to the avid seeker. However, Olu Oguibe has noted the deep and enduring frustrations that were Irobi's lot in the United Kingdom: the isolation and dissatisfaction (in addition to the hunger to follow in Soyinka's footsteps) that drove him from Sheffield to Leeds; the expiration of his fellowship that invariably left him in dire straits; his experience of racism at Liverpool John Moores University, where he was constrained to teach to support himself; and the crucial loss in England of an appreciative community of like-minded talented and defiant young writers committed both to personal survival and national revival. Oguibe concludes, then, that the period of Irobi's career at Nsukka, though tempestuous, was ironically the most productive period of his life. Oguibe, who regards *The Fronded Circle* as Irobi's "sole play of exile," dates *Cemetery Road* to the period before Irobi's exile.

Even with Irobi's manuscripts and papers still unavailable, the history of military dictatorship in Nigeria and correspondences in Irobi's representations of the military in *Cemetery Road* and in such plays as *Nwokedi* and *The Other Side of the Mask* help in placing the play both in historical

context and in Irobi's canon. Providentially, too, *Cemetery Road* won the World Trust Award in the United Kingdom in 1992, which apparently virtually settles the matter. However, if Irobi's representation of whiteness in *Cemetery Road* is assumed to be altogether prophecy rather than chronicle, the actual experience of racism clearly encouraged him to consolidate his vision. That rendered unnecessary in the many years before its actual publication a revision of his manuscript with regard to European racism, except perhaps if revision indeed added an edge to what had only been imagined, heard, or read.¹ But even while retaining close affinity with Irobi's earlier plays, *Cemetery Road* unarguably introduces new elements in Irobi's drama. Yet the focal concern with racism and with representations as projections rooted in imperialistic desires in the play is consistent with Irobi's scholarly engagements at the turn of the century and thus warrants the credible conjecture that the play was completed in the United Kingdom.²

Irobi's protagonist in *Cemetery Road*, Mazeli, his fiancée, Somadina, and his schoolmate, Lawani, are impassioned in their interrogation of European representation of Africans. Years after the event, Somadina's recollection of racism in the United Kingdom to BBC correspondent Hazel is still bitter:

You see, I did my master's degree in Mass Communication in England, at the University of London. My dissertation topic was "The Image of Black Women in the British Media." I drew up a questionnaire and rang up people randomly to interview them. One of my subjects was an old woman who lived in Hampstead. When I got to her house she opened the door, asked me in and gave me a cup of coffee. When I finished drinking it, she threw the cup, beautiful ceramic cup, into the rubbish bin. In my presence! (132)

Somadina traces the process of the Hampstead woman's formation of racist attitudes to visual representations of African women on BBC television screens, and she plays in a video machine a BBC tape containing "*assorted negative images*

of black women and ends with the *Hottentot Venus*" (133). In his censure of Douglas, another BBC correspondent and M16 undercover agent, Mazeli indicates a firm grasp of Europe's violations of Africa and the means by which the African has been excluded from "the human family" through the creation and perpetuation of authorised representations of the African: "For seven centuries now you have plastered negative images of Africa on your glittering screen. Images of Africans as beings less than human. The Noble Savage. The Hottentot Venus. The Dancing Ape. The Primitive Pigmy. Somalian skeletons choking on crumbs of bread. Inkatha warriors wielding clubs and pangas [. . .]" (44).

Ideologically charged questions about the mode of representing Africa and African experience and the authentic interpretation of those representations are mooted throughout the process of Mazeli's joint creation of the documentary on Nigeria with the BBC correspondents; it is indeed the central issue in the contestation of the ownership of the documentary. In his final death trance, Mazeli's astounding gifts to Douglas and Hazel include books that demonstrate both Europe's annexation of historiography as a formidable imperialistic tool given its ostensible claim to objectivity as well as books that contend that Western historiography is complicit with ideological mythmaking:

Hazel: (*tactfully*) What is the title of your book?

Douglas: *Africa in History*. By Basil Davidson. And yours?

Hazel: *White Mythologies*. By Robert Young . . .

Douglas: What more has he given you?

Hazel: *The World and its People* by Thomas Nelson.

Douglas: (*flips through it*) A textbook used to teach History in British secondary schools in the 1920s. What is the relevance? . . .

Hazel: (*leafing through*) Wait a minute. Look at this?

[As Hazel gazes at the page, with Douglas peering from behind her back, a clear, articulate voice with a BBC accent reads out the following passage from a recorded tape through the loudspeakers.]

Voice: The Negro is best described as an overgrown child, vain, self-indulgent, and fond of idleness, but with a good heart. Life is so easy to him in his native home that he has never developed the qualities of industry, self-denial, and forethought . . . The Negroes have never yet united in a strong and stable kingdom. He lives in a hut built of mud, reeds, or grasses, and wears little or no clothing. Amongst Negro tribes wholesale human sacrifices are common. (136-37)

Irobi is interested in narratives of race, their sources and modes of dissemination as well as the processes through which they become accepted as verified knowledge. The mass media and school curriculum are pivotal in the scheme that he discerns.

Colonial mythmaking sought legitimacy by the criminal collaboration of professionals from a great diversity of highly regarded human intellectual pursuits in the fabrication of narratives that complemented each other in inventing an ideologically normal "native." Theologians whose oracular readings of revealed scripture tended to appropriate to themselves the sacrosanctity due to the divine texts and therefore to project themselves beyond the pale of legitimate human interrogation, and scientists who sought sanctuary in the abiding myth of procedural objectivity especially demonstrate the subtlety of this process. Douglas's assumption that he is more intelligent than Lawani because he is white and the latter black illustrates the uncritical citation of science as irrefutable proof of a colonial myth and highlights the insidiousness of science as mythmaking. Drawing on well-

known sexual myths about the African male, Douglas tells Lawani, "I've told you I am not interested in your Zulu dick, haven't I?" (120). Similarly, referring to Mazeli, he says to Hazel: "Then why not screw him and get the [contested] tape. These Africans would give anything for a white pussy" (110).

Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its legacy are certainly part of the intellectual baggage *Cemetery Road* acknowledges. Douglas is initially impervious to the human reality of those he comes into contact with because he is inhibited by the cast iron wall of centuries of colonial myths and stereotypes that he happily acquiesces in and thus hardens further rather than seek to question. The change in his attitude is heralded by his passage through a transformational ritual and is indicated in his awakening to the human cost of white pleasure: "This assignment to your country, Nigeria, has opened my eyes to things I never knew. For example, what sugar has to do with slavery, and chocolate with colonization. It is a new insight and will live with me forever" (139). Irobi's crucial emphasis, however, is the political implication of Douglas's moral and intellectual growth: "But before I leave let me ask an innocent and honest question: In a country with such enormous human and material resources, why does the shit always rise to the top? Why can't you get an intelligent leader who understands what international politics is all about? Some serious-minded bloke who can get you out of this magnificent mess? Someone with a vision" (140). Irobi's primary concern is the politics of the postcolony and his intense interest in the role of the media in perpetuating colonial myths is only an aspect of his engagement with the history of Western violations, interferences, and expropriations of Africa. He probes the processes through which these culminate in contemporary neocolonialist exploitations. Moreover, the theme of colonial representations is also at another level related to a crucial preoccupation of *Cemetery Road*: the authentic form of artistic representation.

Irobi's intriguing enlistment of even Professor Madubujoala in the ranks of postcolonial scholars is his subtle indication of the pervasiveness of the discourse in former European colonies. The seminal insight evoked by the title of Madubujoala's doctoral thesis, "Caliban, Cannibalism and Colonialism in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," is of course the ongoing revaluation of the European canon central in postcolonial discourse and the basic inspiration of Irobi's own project in *Sycorax*. Yet Madubujoala's portrait in the play is unflattering. He is unproductive as an academic, treacherous to colleagues, works as a spy for a military dictatorship, and sexually intimidates both female students and members of staff. Like Irobi's earlier Marxists, Madubujoala demonstrates that a forceful intellectual or ideological discourse can degenerate into a mere contemporary intellectual fad. Madubujoala perfunctorily contests the designation of his world as "Third World" and although instinctively aware that the intellectual can assume the responsibility to change his/her world, he flinches on recognising its inherent tragic possibility. Through him, at the outset of the play, Irobi poses the central question of the intellectual's role in society against which all of the central characters define themselves: "What is our role here? In this portion of the world where God has not finished creation? (*in a lowered tone*) And suppose the egghead decides to climb down from the steps of his ivory tower to confront the stark, humiliating realities of life as it is lived here, what will be his fate?" (6). Irobi's contemplation of the responsible life as one of necessary heroic self-sacrifice is all the more compelling as the response to Madubujoala's question assumes the form of a stage direction noting the rise to a higher pitch of a dirge sung for a committed intellectual. Madubujoala's citation of W.B. Yeats in the same episode reinforces this insight: "We begin to live fully only when we realize that life is tragic" (*Cemetery* 7). Irobi's theme is the role of the intellectual in a society under siege and his demonstration-piece is Mazeli

Anyanwu for his possession of the generosity of self-giving.

Mazeli is in the mould of Irobi's earlier heroes, towering in stature, larger than life, but in addition uniquely combining intense activism with visionary and artistic prowess. Son of an Igbo Baptist minister martyred during the Nigeria-Biafra war, Mazeli denounces Christianity and if traditional religion holds a certain fascination for him, the beatings of his heart are truly stirred by the hagiography of political reformers. Threatened by death, he transforms his father's ecclesiastical tenacity and will to self-sacrifice into a readiness for political martyrdom in the manner of the icons he adores: "I know it is my destiny. After all Che Guevera died at the age of thirty five. But at least he struck a blow for the wretched of the earth. And his memory has become an image, a symbol of resistance that survived the corporate capitalistic greed of the twentieth century" (47). Expectedly, Mazeli's theatre is overtly political and his lot persecution. By his establishment of a community theatre, he not only works with the common folk and assumes responsibility for their welfare, he also makes their daily struggles for survival the substance of his theatrical performances. Irobi's revolutionary drama abounds with passionate artists, sculptors, painters, carvers, musicians, dancers, and choreographers engaged in absorbing experimentation with different metaphors and forms to incarnate the truth and to convey the fervour and intensity of the playwright's will to a revolution. Dissatisfied with artistic forms that can only offer variegated representational biases in his earlier drama, in *Cemetery Road* Irobi not only authenticates drama in its generic form as capable of political transformation, but he rigorously seeks the specific transformative dramatic form par excellence.

Irobi thought that the distinctive power of oral literature that made it particularly amenable to topical and subversive deployment was its latitude for improvisation: "The oral African tradition is enactment. It involves the body, it involves the spirit,

it involves the soul, it gives the latitude for improvisation and for commenting on what is happening at the moment that you are creating. So it is not a fixed text; it is open, it is explosive; and it is subversive—it subverts the political structure” (“Eclipsed” n.pag.). Mazeli’s theory of directing illuminates Irobi’s own later procedures built around a scriptless text in which improvisation is pivotal and actors are only provided with a key idea or image. The command performance “The Beasts of Sandhurst” that is meant for the military dictator and his entourage highlights the procedure.

The provocative prompt is the director’s invocation of a representative image, not only in words but also in tone:

(Speaking into the tape recorder with rage) Of all the professions in the world, and of all classes of human beings, the one that produces nothing, absolutely nothing, is the military class. The military are an artificial people with synthetic minds living in a metallic world, a world removed from the worlds of other human beings. A world of orders, arrests, medals, drills, march pasts and decorations. Men for whom the days have no names. Sunday is Monday and Monday is Sunday. *(passionately)* In what century, through the ages, have soldiers contributed to human progress and civilization except through destruction? Destruction of hopes, destruction of dreams and ambitions. How do you think such breed of men, with their little vapid minds, can discharge the responsibility of government? How? *(Cemetery 84)*

By providing the enveloping vision and insisting on focused and rigorous rehearsals, the director ensures the density of the artistic product and its utmost applicability in the context of the production. And by challenging the cast to participate in creating the roles they play (with the director himself willing to assume tasking roles), he strengthens the bond between the director and the cast and presumably easily places them at the aesthetic and ideological core of the performance. Moreover, the democratic imperative inherent in the communal

participation in creating theatre emblematised in the role of an unobtrusive stage director working in league with the cast is the opposite of a military dictator absorbed in delusions of his own apotheosis that they enact:

Mazeli stands aloof pointing out, in silence, the blocking of the scene. The effigy of the president is seated on a chair with a cigar in his mouth, a whole chicken in one hand and a pistol in the other. His bodyguards surround him. From both sides, an obese businessman gives him money from a suitcase and a European offers him Thomas Cooks travellers' cheques. A crouching academic in sandals tenders his curriculum vitae with one hand and polishes the president's black army boots with one hand. At the academic's foot is a portfolio boldly emblazoned "Future Ambassador." A chorus of Muslim worshippers are 'salaaming' at his feet: Bowing and kneeling and rising in succession. Some Christians, equally, move in an Indian file and kneel at his feet with candles in their hands. One carries a censer of incense. (Cemetery 76)

Mazeli represents the military in a manner that is consistent with and extends the insights in Irobi's own portraits of them in *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of the Mask*, and in *Cemetery Road* itself.

Irobi chooses to introduce his hero in *Nwokedi* at the moment of his encounter with soldiers at a Youth Corps orientation camp to set in relief his daring and defiance and his refusal to acknowledge the delimitation of his sovereignty by conceited authorities:

(Nwokedi enters in Youth Corp uniform. Awado [a soldier] turns and sees him)

Awado: Come here! Why you no dey for parade?
(*Nwokedi ignores him*). No be you I de ask? Why you no dey for drill?

Nwokedi: (*with epical disgust*) Drill? Isn't it drill that took away your reasoning?

Awado: (grabs Nwokedi by the arm) I dey ask you!
Why you no dey march?

Nwokedi: Marching deflects a man's thoughts,
deflects his reasoning, turns him into a
zombie.

Awado: (bristling) Na me you dey call zombie?

Nwokedi: (to the squatting corpers) Did I call him a
zombie now? (tears at his hand) Come
on, leave me! (Nwokedi 26)

Irobi equally sets out to dramatise attributes of the military he thought representative: their illiteracy conveyed through their use of Pidgin English, predictable tendency to misunderstand the most obvious of words or concepts, and a certain eagerness to draw attention to their ignorance by flaunting it. He foregrounds especially their inclination to excessive violence and in its context obliquely ascribes sacrificial status to their victim: "*The soldiers pummel Nwokedi with blows, then swing him like a sack of groundnut about to be hurled into a lorry. After more kicks and blows, they bear him out like a sacrificial ram about to be slaughtered*" (Nwokedi 33).

Habituation to violence is also central in Irobi's portrait of the military in *The Other Side of the Mask* even where he concedes a considerable degree of enlightenment and education to the high-ranking navy officer, Kamuche, the protagonist's elder brother. However, Kamuche's recourse to breaking doors in order to force a contact with Jamike, who refuses to meet him, indicates the even greater habituation of military officers to violence. Kamuche illustrates how a sense of terrible self-worth transforms even the suspicion of a minor insult into a criminal affront that only violence can resolve. Thus, what is mere custom for the rank and file assumes symbolic proportions in high-ranking officers. Kamuche's sense of affront is manifest as he commands his orderly to demolish the outer offending door: "(a new wave of rage baths his being. He strikes the Orderly with his swagger stick) "Why are you caressing the key? Won't

you shatter that door before I shatter your skull? Smash the key. Hammer the lock! Tear the shutter off its hinges! Devastate the door!" (*Other Side* 6). However, as the door gives way, Jamike escapes through the window into the garden; the separating door, expectedly locked, is steel. Irobi illustrates the enormous difficulties of rising above the propensity to violence by Kamuche's complete failure to recognise the need to modify his strategies: "(to his orderly) Melt the steel. Batter it. Mangle it. Pummel it into liquid iron" (6). The inaccessibility of the frontiers of the human soul through sheer violence is the insight Ziphora offers to him: "Why are you so full of force. (*Silence*) When will you learn that brazen force cannot get you to him. Even if it gets you to his body, can it get you into his soul?" (9). In *Cemetery Road*, Irobi explores the peculiar forceful manner through which the military attempt to penetrate the innermost paths of the human individual: torture.

Edward Said articulates the roles of intellectuals to set in relief their inevitable marginality in terms that approximate Turner's liminal figures about whom Turner writes: "Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, 'edgemen,' who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and roleplaying and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination. In their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure" (*Ritual* 128). Evoking the trope of exile but extending its scope beyond the social and political history of dislocation and migration to the metaphysical, Said comments on the invariable liminality of every socially responsible intellectual as well as his/her inevitable dissidence:

Even intellectuals who are lifelong members of a society can, in a manner of speaking, be divided into insiders and outsiders: those on the one hand who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming

sense of dissonance or dissent, those who can be called yeasayers: and, on the other hand, the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider, which I believe is the right role for today's intellectual, is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives (so to speak), tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. ("Intellectual" 116-17)

Said theorises that by constantly shunning accommodation, rejecting the prescribed path and time-honoured footsteps, moving away from the centralising authorities, refusing to acknowledge barriers and devoted instead to experimentation and expanding frontiers, the intellectual "stands as a marginal figure outside the comforts of privilege, power, being-at-homeness" (121). This is in the sense that the intellectual is "unusually responsive not to the potentate but to the traveller, not the captive of habit and what is comfortably given but attracted to the provisional and sporty, committed not to maintaining things by an authority we have always known but to innovating by force of risk, experiment, innovation. Not the logic of the conventional but the audacity of daring, and moving, moving, moving, representing change, not standing still" (124). Irobi's intellectuals are also invariably artists groomed in a tradition with spiritual depth, and his enactment of the tribulations of liminality thus traverses both the social and historical realm as well as the metaphysical.

Jamike speculates in *The Other Side of the Mask* that the denial of recognition and laurels to artists drives them mad because he realises the power of the dominant hegemony that confers values and honours and determines social norms, tastes

and judgements. Professor Njemanze, the chairman of the national award-giving panel for sculpture, confirms Jamike's insight when he draws Jamike's attention to the extraneous factors, rather than to the intrinsic qualities, that account for the award of prizes: "[Y]ou must also understand that simply because a work wins an award does not mean it is better than all the others submitted. In fact it does not even mean that [it] is a great work of art or a meaningful contribution to society, humanity" (64-65). He refers instead to the hidden polemic that determines public decorations: "[E]very prize, every laurel, every award has its own politics of acceptance" (64). Earlier on, Dr Animalu reflects on some of the institutions through which society rewards or punishes its own: "Why do embassies refuse to sponsor your exhibitions? And the University, why has it refused to give you grants to improve your creative work? Mr Sculptor, why does the Yellow Book decree that your works are not suitable for promotion? Why are you given one and a half points for a piece of sculpture that took you seven years to carve?" (*Other Side* 49). Patrons of the arts, and custodians of society's ideological aesthetic hierarchy (and thus of the authorised version of truth), these institutions also easily become censors charged with the responsibility of exorcising the threat of deviance or dissidence. Jamike's lot is the symbolic fate of the visionary intellectual or artist who has the courage to walk the solitary path of truth.

Following Lacan, Patrick Colm Hogan has noted that personal identity, rather than being a direct and immediate sense of self, is instead a constitution of self that is rooted in external attribution. In other words, it derives from the statements and attitudes of others (104-05). Hogan concludes, "Whatever one may think of it—whether one finds it a fact to celebrate or to deplore—each of us begins his/her self-constitution on the basis of social categories which are the result of attribution, not experience, and which locate us in one or more social hierarchies" (106). Jamike illustrates the

dramatic collapse of the self-constituted ego confronted by the pitiless gaze of society's bogeyman as well as the self's paradoxical irresistible desire for that gaze to authenticate the self-image:

Jamike: Prof, do you remember the last exhibition I had at the University Gallery?

Njemanze: I do. It was sponsored by the Department of Fine Arts.

Jamike: I am happy you do. Do you remember that there was a cupboard behind my stand?

Njemanze: I don't.

Jamike: Well there was. There was a cupboard. (*re-enacts by hiding behind the statue*) I hid behind that cupboard listening to the comments of the visitors. I lay there like a rabbit drinking in people's statements about my works. I was there panting like a hunted rodent when you walked in. Do you remember the comments you made about my works?

Njemanze: How can I? It's a long time ago.

Jamike: Not long enough for you to forget what you said. And to remind you, what you said was quite different from what you wrote in the visitor's book.

Njemanze: What did I say?

Jamike: Are you asking me? Can't you remember the comments you made about my works?

Njemnaze: I can't.

Jamike: You can't (*sulkily*) The incripid tongue! The verbal cannibalism. The lacerating remarks! The intellectual horse play!

(to his face) Prof, I am a sensitive animal. I am like an oyster without a shell. Every piece of grit that touches my naked body itches. That is why I remember very lucidly every word you said that evening about my works. They are stamped on my mind like scars. Yes, father, they are festering in my soul like sores. (70-71)

Irobi's concerns here are many: he is fascinated by the many faces of aesthetic judgment and the motivations of their constantly changing countenances; the artist's special experience of every individual's dependence on others' judgment to ascertain and assess self-worth; the artist's commitment to the discovery of truth even in full awareness that the reward for the endeavour may be grief; the dross beyond which the truth is ultimately found; the vagaries and discriminations of human memory; and of course the particular susceptibilities, eccentricities, and compulsions of his protagonist. *The Other Side of the Mask* especially demonstrates how society's assumption of the prerogative to legislate on aesthetic tastes and to canonise its trustworthy children is invariably also a means of exacerbating the marginality of her deviant ones, pushing them even to the fringes of madness.

Jamike is impelled to affirm his sanity several times in the course of the play: "I am a balanced mind, Prof!" (91). But recognising Njemanze, the university curator, as an image of authority seeking conformity with the status quo, his earlier question to Njemanze affirms dissidence as the redeeming virtue: "But Prof., don't you think that I would have failed in my duty to my vision and my generation if anything I did impressed you?" (71). From Irobi's earliest career, the guillotine, the court, the censor, the police, and the army abound as institutions for compelling or extorting conformity. Irobi

equally constantly revalidates the power of the ancient technique of exorcising deviance by projecting the stigma of madness onto a dissident production, the aberrant word, or vision. The demons that hound Jamike are legion and Irobi does not subject Jamike's experience to an explicit political interpretation. Thus, Jamike's torture is primarily mental and the tormentors he arraigns in his mental court of appeal are multiple. However, Jamike's sculpture of the military places them among the constellation of forces that torment him, and reveals his dread of being devoured, among his pathologies:

(Jamike unveils the third piece of sculpture. It is the clay mould of a hyena in full military uniform. Its broad tongue is red with blood. In each paw, it clutches a handful of human beings. It is obvious the hyena is devouring the human beings.)
(71)

Mazeli's exploration of the theme of "Military Dictatorship and Cannibalism" on stage foregrounds the varying resources available to activist-artists working in different media. Irobi apparently suggests through Mazeli's experience of physical torture that the immediacy of daring human bodies on stage has greater powers to confront and provoke dictatorship than the equally poignant message on stone, wood, canvas, or alabaster.

Stanton B Garner, Jr has drawn attention in "Post-Brechtian" political drama to "the almost obsessive interest in the body as a political unit, its function within the play of political forces, and its role within the contest of subjectivity and subjection. Exploiting the body's centrality within the theatrical medium, contemporary political dramatists have figured the actor's body as a principal site of theatrical and political intervention, establishing (in the process) a contemporary 'body politic' rooted in the individual's sentient presence" (146). Garner identifies "the body in its deepest extremity" as the most pervasive and urgent form the human body has assumed on

the post-Brechtian political stage and accounts for this emblem in terms of the material reification of power's hold over the body: "To inflict deprivation, confinement, and violation upon the body is to bring about a phenomenal collapse reflected in the ambiguous term 'subject,' for as the body loses its status as the seat of a self-transcending subjectivity, it becomes objectified in its transfixing sentience, 'subject' only to its liable corporeality" (152). In Irobi's theatre, the maiming, gashing, and crushing of the body to set its mortality in relief, that is, the penetration of power into the deepest interiority of the body, is only a metonymy of power's desire to rein in the human spirit and to curb its anxieties of its own incompleteness. Discerning in power's pathological lust for victims a certain manifestation of its weakness and awareness of the power of its victims, Terry Eagleton has noted that it "is the mangled bodies of those upon whom power weighs most heavily which offer the most eloquent testimony of its bankruptcy" (*Holy* 134-35).

Appearing onstage backing the audience, gulping down his liquor and "spoon[ing] pieces of meat from a steaming bowl of pepper-soup on the table" (97), Colonel Dogon Burra in *Cemetery Road* epitomises military cannibalism, a pathological hunger for flesh that finds institutional validation in the state torture chamber. Burra's insistence on Mazeli's life is ultimately a subliminal atavistic desire for his victim's flesh and blood. However, bleeding and broken, Mazeli's battered body highlights the fissures and clefts through which the audience apprehends the protagonist's enduring spirit. For a play in which the worldview is deeply rooted in Igbo metaphysics, the insistent allusion to Christ can only serve to privilege Mazeili's self-giving commitment and the transformative impact of pain through a universally acknowledged model. The association is obviously with Christ-like persecution when Mazeli is blindfolded and tortured with a "crown of thorns made from barbed wire"; when this etches a discernible halo around his

head (*"The ring of blood is still around his head"* (134); and when he affirms his representative martyrdom. Moreover, Mazeli's forgiveness of the person who tortures him and his eventual betrayal and murder by his closest school friend accentuate the obvious allusions.

Garner has observed the power of pain to reach across the boundary separating stage and author and that between stage and audience: "Even in its dramatized forms, pain violates the perceptual demarcations and the differential spheres of 'otherness' essential to representation, including the spectator within its discomfort through a kind of neuro-mimetic transferral (the impulse to close one's eyes during simulated blindings onstage reflects, not simply an aversion to the *sight* of pain, but also a deeper defense against its sympathetic arising within the field of one's own body)" (161). Citing Edward Bond, Garner foregrounds the political consequence of the enactment of human suffering and its vicarious replication in the audience as a stimulus to political awareness and motivation to action or intervention (162). In *Cemetery Road*, the sadism, macabre humour, illiteracy, and sheer inhumanity of those who torture Mazeli (just like the absurdity of the confession they seek to extort from him) are calculated to estrange the audience from the viciousness of the military dictatorship they represent. They serve also to make the audience empathise with the victim and his ideals and to amplify his suffering, as it is unjustified. Irobi's model of political action can be discerned in the students' intervention at Mazeli's death, their exaction of revenge on his murderer as the representative figure of the establishment that institutionalises Mazeli's torture and death, and moreover as a possible threat to their own lives. The course of Irobi's development as a dramatist is a movement towards the unmediated intervention of the artist in the sphere of politics, and this is linked to the overarching attempt to negotiate the boundaries between ritual and politics and to establish spirit possession into a set of embodied political

practices. The two movements, the aesthetic and the political, come to full fruition in the career and death of Mazeli.

Remarking on the sensuousness of possession, Paul Stoller has contended that given the centrality of the sentient body in possession and the political power that devolves from embodiment, spirit possession is basically a phenomenological arena in which "cultural memory is fashioned and refashioned to produce and reproduce power" (637) and writes further:

There can be little doubt that the body is the focus of possession phenomenon. Whether writers call it trance or possession, the same dramatic process presents itself cross-culturally. Musicians, praise-singers, or priests use a variety of expressive media to entice spirits to leave nonhuman realms and enter human bodies. In so doing, the spirit enters social space, transforming mediums both physically and symbolically. (636)

Stoller indicates that this power of embodiment enables the crossing of the threshold separating ritual from political practice and in some cultures the embodied practices constitute power-in-the-world (636). Indeed, Mazeli's death-trance is a gesture in the transformation of an embodied practice into a paradigm for political action.

Mazeli discards the initial play he rehearses with his students for the President and his entourage as too long, given the short concentration span of soldiers; he rejects as well the students' improvised piece as rather too banal and remarks to his students: "With the piece you have just shown me, the play is still trapped by the Proscenium Arch. Now we are going to break that illusion" (112). The break Mazeli seeks as he proposes to stage an African masquerade for the President and his entourage is both aesthetic and epistemological. He seeks to move beyond the threshold of theatrical illusion to the greyness of reality; out of the secular into the sacred; across the frontiers of representation to encounter unmediated reality itself. In "What Would Picasso Have Said?," Irobi's account of

Picasso's fascination with African sculptures in terms of their intrinsic value as aesthetic and religious objects speaks to Picasso's failure to recognise another signal quality of African sculptures: "their roles as political/judicial artefacts or instruments in the administration of pre-colonial/traditional African communities" (5). In seeking to assassinate the president while playing the role of a mask in a play meant to entertain him, Mazeli evokes the traditional conception of the mask as the ancestor-incarnate capable of dispassionate justice; that is, he seeks to invoke a representative cultural symbol as an agent of revolutionary change.

Christopher Balme has noted the peripheral function of the mask in contemporary Western culture in contrast to the still flourishing tradition of masking as an integral part of ritual and ceremonial life in many postcolonial cultures. Remarking that in such cultures masks are no mere theatrical devices but "represent a link to the parallel world of spirits, gods, and ancestors," Balme contends that "masks and their performative displays are cultural texts, precisely encoded and decipherable for the initiated" (181). He likewise observes that this embodiment of supernatural forces "indicates a transformative process offering a powerful metaphor for the theatre" (187). As for Irobi, he adapts the mask in his drama to exploit both its spirituality and its theatricality.

Mazeli cautions Hazel, who seeks to take a photograph of the masquerade: "It is a sacrilege, Hazel. (*angrily*) This is not a play thing. It is a sacred spirit" (113). He approaches the mask himself as a spirit, with trepidation, invocations, and sacrifices, venerating it as the all-father: "*Mazeli brings out some yellow powder: odo, a piece of white chalk, an egg, some palm frond leaves and begins to chant 'Igbaala egwu ike mbu, iya ahaha.'* The actors/actresses take it up and intensify the rhythm. At its peak he changes the song into the hotter 'Arikonko ugu abiala'. It heats up. As the actors and actresses stamp their feet furiously at the same spot, MAZELI kneels before the mask" (113). Mazeli

completely excludes the possibility of any form of artistic representation impacting the President and his entourage beneficently; his appeal is ultimately to his audience to make a radical change by direct revolutionary intervention in the body politic:

Tonight, in the auditorium of the Nicon Neo Niga Hotel, at this point in the play, the President will be clapping in appreciation, thinking that this is a gesture of courtesy and welcome. At that moment, the illusion will be broken and reality shattered. As he raises his hand to clap, (*demonstrates*) you will use this knife and stab him three times between the fourth and fifth rib. That's where the human heart hides (*signals for the tune to go up*) Come!

[Once more the song goes up and the Mask sways menacingly in measured dance steps to the effigy and, with indescribable fury, falls upon it stabbing it three times. As he raises his hand for the fourth, blood drips from his hand and stains the blade of the knife . . .] (114-15)

Irobi paradoxically renounces faith in art but only to advocate a form of art that privileges a direct intervention in the political sphere; he revalidates Nwokedi's attempt to appropriate the bodily practice of spiritual possession as an influence on power-in-the world.

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins have noted that in "many African and Afro-Caribbean rituals, the rhythm of the drum—the most significant musical instrument—is no mere accompaniment but one of the principal forces guiding the action: it shapes the dance and song and helps summon spiritual power(s)" (64). In *Nwokedi*, at the climactic moment of the ritual, the drumming, the incantations, and the dancing initiate a suprarational consciousness and Nwokedi is appropriately invoked as the god-incarnate. Irobi also exploits dreams and a sense of foreboding consistent with the extraterrestrial phenomenon of possession to deepen the feeling

of tragic inevitability. Mrs Nwokedi cautions her husband about going to the festival: "I perceive the smell of blood. And the stench of graves. In my inner mind, I see fresh mounds of earth. (*mystically*) Senior, the scent of death is thick in the festive air" (Nwokedi 86). To be sure, Nwokedi's own dream is an uncanny foreshadowing of the decapitation episode and is dexterously infused with the idiom of ritual music and possession:

[Y]ou know how dreams are. It was at the festival. The drums were pounding and the voices dirging for the old year. The earth cracked under the thunder of our thousand feet. The music banged in my brain with the obstinacy of blood. I was possessed. They brought out the ram. I peered at the ram. I only saw you there bleating like a ram . . . But my knife was already in the air. Its glinting edge descended on your neck. Your head, severed with that single stroke, fell off that way. Your body this way. And blood! Blood drizzled from your body like rain. It drizzled on and on until the contour of the earth was covered with a garment of blood. (Nwokedi 83)

On stage, Nwokedi's recollection of the Ekumeku's exaltation of his act in the dream is seamlessly woven into the Ekumeku's chant, "Evula agbala oso," both a lionisation of Nwokedi and a perceptive comment on the powerlessness of one in a state of possession to restrain oneself even from murder. Dream and reality, the intangible and the corporeal merge to eerie astonishing effects in the rousing chant of physical bodies on stage, a chant that in reality is a comment on the remembered corresponding action of their own shades in a dream. Yet while the discourse of ritual possession would invoke spiritual animation to account for Nwokedi's execution of his father and brother-in-law as representative corrupt politicians, in *Nwokedi* the pivotal action coincides with Nwokedi's own convictions and makes him culpable for his action. The purported mask of the gods resembles Nwokedi's face too

closely to retain its inscrutability.

Mazeli emerges from the torture chamber a liminal figure, the embodiment of the famed paradoxical spiritual power of physical weakness: scourged but alive though imperceptibly dying from the effect of the lethal injection given to him. His conduct and his words appear rather dislocated or fractured, and seem to assume significance that resonates across multiple frontiers of experience. But he labours under the crushing weight of his own corporeality and imminent death:

Hazel: I still can't understand why you have suddenly become strange and distant.

Mazeli: (*as he straps the watch to his wrist*) It is because by the time you return, I will not be here. In fact I will be no more. The voice you hear is that of a man who has a date with Death. (*He embraces her*) That means we shall never meet again. (*Breaks away. Almost to himself*) Yes, I am a man whom Death has pitched his tent in front of his house waiting for him to return from the long journey of life. Goodbye ...

Somadina: Mazeli, I know you are always tense and strange when you have a production. But tonight, you are more than strange. What is happening to you?

Mazeli: (*showing her the needle point on his arm*) Lawani could not save my life. Even after he called, the Colonel still gave me an injection. A mixture of ethanol and cyanide.

Somadina: Cyanide?

Fatima: Why cyanide?

Mazeli: So that I can die slowly, day by day. In instalments, in his own words. (*Cemetery 140-41*)

Soyinka alludes to this simultaneous habitation of different realms of existence in terms of somnambulism. He refers to the possessed singer as “the mouthpiece of the chthonic forces of the matrix and his somnambulist ‘improvisations’—a simultaneity of musical and poetic forms—are not representations of the ancestor, recognitions of the living or unborn, but of the no man’s land of transition between and around these temporal definitions of experience” (*Myth* 148). However, the mask is more than the visual symbol of the liminal space Mazeli occupies: “*He reaches in a corner and pulls out a body mask. As he gets into it, the drums come over from the village*” (135). The mask also highlights the ritual status of his imminent death as a sacrifice. As a child reduced to tears on learning of his father’s imminent martyrdom, Mazeli had been sternly rebuked by the father: “What are you doing? Crying? Come on stop that nonsense! You are man. Like a bull at the shrine, selected to be slaughtered for the festival of life, you must bear the blows of the butchers’ knives without a cry, without a tremor” (59). Approaching his own death, his allegiances political rather than religious, Mazeli accepts it with the equanimity of a “sacrificial ram” (137). His will is to translate his fate into a herald of public good: “Tonight, the Sun will blow its fuse. Yes. (*almost to himself*) Tonight, the Sun will go down in blood. But by dawn, a new cock will crow. By tomorrow morning, the future will rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of this meeting. That is the meaning of this ritual” (140). However, that is precisely the tragic paradox: Mazeli’s presumption that he incarnates the will of the god and the consequent frustration of his deepest aspiration. Professor’s fate in Soyinka’s *The Road*, though different in crucial respects, clearly illuminates Mazeli’s.

The title of Irobi’s play, *Cemetery Road*, is a virtual annotation of Soyinka’s more oblique title, *The Road*. Soyinka’s play is one in which the entire arena of the precarious human adventure is imaged as the proverbial valley of death, and the ancient

myth of the human pilgrim as a passer-by relentlessly evoked in compelling literal and figurative terms. Soyinka's gripping theme of death is foregrounded by multiple pointers. There are, for example, the sustained litany of casualties of road accidents, the repeated invocation of their memories or even spirits through ritual naming or mimicry of their characteristic acts, and the haunting dirges that proliferate in the text. Professor's obsession with death and Murano, half-human and half-spirit, an insignia of death's abiding presence, similarly makes the theme focal. These along with a collocation of eschatological images make human mortality the inevitable cul-de-sac in Soyinka's emblematic existential highway of life. Derek Wright notes that "the prevailing imagery is of abortive waste and decay: the purposeless deaths of the road are imaged as menstrual refuse, the doomed lorries 'pregnant with stillborns,' and the play exudes a rich mixture of smells, from Salubi's stinking mouth to the odors of police corruption and the wormy stench of stockfish and the corpses they resemble" (95). *Cemetery Road* is a play that is about death and is also suffused with dirges.

Cemetery Road opens with a death scene: "A funeral procession. The mourners are bearing a coffin and intoning the dirge "Udu m akuwala." In front, leading as they grieve into the auditorium, is an eleven-year old boy bearing a bouquet of fresh flowers" (6). As the deceased himself was also eleven when his own father was martyred, Irobi seems to allude to an implacable and repetitive pattern, a living tradition of death, of which the carrier lineage is the paradigm. His presiding theme of human mortality is also given a broader base in the decimation of an entire community, the peasants of Bakalori and their eco system for defying tyranny. The haulage of carrion and torrents of blood amply evoked through the anguished memories and reenactments of the surviving but physically and mentally maimed peasants recall the ravenous cemetery deployed in *The Road* as a trenchant reminder of mortality. By

far the most haunting and eerie episode in *Cemetery Road*, however, is the one in which Mazeli's mother conducts the funeral obsequies of her living son when he resolves to defy the military:

Mazeli's Mother: Can't you see what lies at the end
of this street we are now walking?
(*pause*) The cemetery. Mazeli, you have
to choose now between your life and the
tape [. . .]

*[They intone "Peace, perfect peace." After
the first stanza . . .]*

Mazeli: I choose the tape.

*[Stunned, they sing the last stanza as if
hypnotized by his answer: MAZELI's MOTHER
gives them candles and as she lights all of
them.]*

Mazeli's Mother: Let me look at you now, my son,
for I know this is the last and final time I
will see your face with the wind and
breath of life on it. Let me touch you now
for I know when I return, this body will
be as cold as the cement floor of your faith
on which, despite what you said, we still
stand upon. Like your father, you have
made your choice. And it is yours and
yours alone. What we are keeping is not
your vigil but the final communion
between mother and child. Let me
embrace you for the last and final time.

*[She weeps as she embraces him, then, puts
out her own candle's flame with her thumb
and forefinger. The choir intones 'Laa nudo,*

laa nudo, nwnnem nke m huru n'anya'
 ('Rest in peace, rest in peace, my beloved
 brother') and at her signal, snuff out their
 candles' flames. They leave in an Indian file]
 (62)

Irobi's management of time in this episode is strikingly reminiscent of Soyinka's in *The Road*. He suspends action at Mazeli's house where his ominous decision is awaited and is charged with a sense of destiny, and superimposes as a "flashback" the episode from decades earlier when Mazeli's father had also elected for martyrdom. The revival of time, from a frozen state of arrest after the past irrupts into the critical present, takes the form of Mazeli's replication of his father's choice. Noting a sense of ritual enclosure that haunts the action of *The Road*, Wright has written: "There are no 'flashbacks' from a clearly defined present but a concurrence or synchrony of past and present moments. The past suddenly elides or erupts, without warning, into the present, charging the instant with special energy" (93). The consequence in both plays is a sense of tragic inevitability, of a relentless undercurrent of events that ostensibly sovereign human action ironically ratifies. Biodun Jeyifo contends that Soyinka's use of esoteric discourses and symbols in *The Road* notwithstanding, the play is clearly phenomenologically about "the carnage of human lives on the roads and highways of the coastal strip of West Africa" (Wole 145). Soyinka's road, though, is the inscrutable road of all life. By adding "cemetery" to the title of his play, Irobi accentuates Soyinka's suggestion of the road as a haunting arena of transitions by foregrounding another transculturally acknowledged site of transformation. In reality, however, unlike Soyinka, Irobi is evidently not contemplating the ineluctable human fate in general terms, but its virtual inescapability as the consequence of social activism and defiance of tyranny.

In the final episode of *The Road*, Professor's obsession to

anticipate the future in present time comes to a culmination in his daring attempt to restage the past. Impatient for the cracking of “the slumbering chrysalis of the Word” (*Collected* 187) on which he claims the big toe of Murano’s left foot rests, Professor seeks to hasten his desired moment of human rehabilitation by reuniting the dancer with his mask and staging a parodic egungun dance aimed at mimicking the circumstances of Murano’s accident in a state of possession. The sense of foreboding that Professor’s act of desecration evokes is palpable:

[From inside, the canvas is pushed aside, emerging silently, the egungun. The laughter dies out gradually all eyes on the apparition. One by one the hands splutter and die on the instruments]

Salubi: *[trying to sneak out]*: No one is playing around with my sanity. I’m not staying to witness this.

Prof: Let no one move!

[Salubi hurriedly sits]

Partic. Joe: Professor, you know I am not superstitious. I mean, in my position I can’t afford to be. But this . . . I swear sir, I would sooner you forged a hundred insurance policies.

Prof: I must hope, even now. I cannot yet believe that death’s revelation must be total, or not at all.

Say T.: I reckon this has gone too far. I ain’t scared like all these people so I’m telling you, you’re fooling around where you ain’t got no business. (*Collected* 226)

Professor’s death is a necessary expiation to complete the rite and release the god he abducted.

Professor mischievously calls the mask a costume while

inwardly ascribing potent spiritual forces to it. He also refers to Murano as a child when in reality he recognises Murano as the god-apparent: "Is the child [Murano] interested in that costume [the mask]? You must remember he is a child and bright things attract him" (*Collected* 223). Irobi's Mazeli, on the other hand, calls the mask "a sacred spirit," but ultimately treats it like a theatrical prop. Mazeli's tragedy arises from his presumptuous consideration of his will to a revolution the embodiment of the divine purpose. He does not seek to be "mounted" by the spirit and be led where it pleases, but instead to *use* the mask as a sacred vestment. He feels no inclination to predispose himself to the dissociation of personality that is the hallmark of possession and that transforms the possessed to a vehicle of divine revelation or action. His take on possession, perhaps understandably given his orientation, is instead its theatricality and he seeks to co-opt the spirit of the mask as a character in the realisation of his *plot* to assassinate the President. Expectedly, his ambition miscarries. However, where Soyinka's Professor aims at the attainment of the godhead by the acquisition of forbidden knowledge through his hubristic daring to hold a god captive and subject to his whims, Mazeli contemplates himself as the suffering messiah and his life as a sacrifice for public good. Thus, he refuses to acknowledge personal pain and recognises himself instead as a symbolic scapegoat: "The poison running through my veins, the wounds on my head and blood on my face are not mine. They are scars inflicted on the skin of this nation and the flesh of the future by full-fed beasts who have no vision for our children and their tomorrow's womb" (*Cemetery* 113). Mazeli is not like Professor seeking death's fabled transforming revelation through a vicarious experience of that state; he embodies instead self-sacrificial social activism. In *Cemetery Road*, it is through the presentation of Lawani's death as a parody of the sacrificial victim that the full meaning of Mazeli's death shines through.

Friend, comrade, rival and ultimately Mazeli's mortal foe, Lawani is also a foil to the protagonist and the most developed of Irobi's Marxist characters. Somadina's portrait of Lawani as a student radical cuts a sharp contrast with the autumnal figure. It establishes correspondences, however, in physical outlook and in intellectual disposition and mien with the earlier figures of Ogbansiegbe in *Hangmen Also Die* and Animalu in *The Other Side of the Mask*:

When we were at school you were a Marxist. A revolutionary firebrand, always wearing a red beret, a red shirt, one perpetual pair of jeans trousers, patched at the buttocks to symbolize your identification with poverty and the struggle. You wore a pair of black military boots and a beard that made you look like an Old Testament prophet. And you were always preaching about the great revolution and the liberation of Africa from Western capitalist imperialism. If I remember right, you memorized the entire Communist Manifesto from cover to cover and used to detonate it even to elementary school children playing in the football field during recess. The girls flocked to you thinking you were a messiah, the African reincarnation of Che Guevara. (*Cemetery* 73)

However, Lawani alone among his Marxist comrades acknowledges his ideological recantation, but attempts to theorise his revocation of the ideal by copiously citing personal circumstances, history, and international politics. His reading of Nigerian history resonates with Mazeli's in his conception of Nigeria as a freakish amalgamation of irreconcilable ethnic sovereignties created to serve British imperial interests:

We didn't create this country [. . .] The British did. And they know what they did. How can you put three empires: Oyo, Kanem-Bornu, Bini, and twenty other nations: The Igbos, Itshekiris, Urhobos together, simplify them into tribes, and expect it to work as a nation. People of different cultures, different histories, different religions, different languages. It

can never work. Nigeria is a mere geographical expanse. Not a political entity. Our first national anthem was written by Lord Lugard's concubine. The name, Nigeria itself, was coined by a female British journalist reporting her findings to London: (*cynically*) The Area near the Niger. (*Cemetery* 89)

Even Lawani's insight into the self-reflexive mode of colonialist perception and representation is consistent with Mazeli's and is keen in its perception of the power of mimicry as caricature: "(with a British accent) ' . . . the natives are all the same. They are black, have flat noses and woolly hair. Will make a splendid colony'" (*Cemetery* 119). Lawani's conception of Nigerian history is astounding; his insights into colonialism are impeccable; and his analysis of the insidious powers of the compact between neocolonialism and international politics with international espionage is gripping—except that they all serve to justify Lawani's exaltation of graft and self-indulgence and his elevation of mere material survival as the ultimate purpose of life.

Lawani leads Douglas through a pattern of incantatory rite of passage reminiscent of Gilbert's in Irobi's *The Fronded Circle* as it culminates in a revelation of a web of complicities. For the Briton, the decisive insight is the human suffering and violent appropriation of colonialism that he shares with the West. On the other hand, for the self-proclaimed zealous African patriot the crucial experience is the humiliation he goes through at the exposure of his connivance in his own historical exploitation. Douglas discovers his own complicity in the slave trade even by his partaking of the tastes Europe has cultivated and indulged in; he is also awakened to the conniving African as an indispensable part of the chain of the imperialistic evil:

Lawani: Four hundred years of slavery, twenty million men and women.

Douglas: Africa!

Lawani: Put sugar in your tea, those crystals of our sweat . . .

Douglas: Africa!

Lawani: What has sugar got to do with slavery, tell me, Douglas . . .

Douglas: Africa!

Lawani: From the sugar England became rich, became the envy of the world . . .

Douglas: Africa! (*stops, turns to LAWANI*) But Africans also participated in the slave trade. They captured their fellow Africans from the hinterland and led them to the coasts and the slave ships. African kings built palaces from the money the European paid them for slaves. Some of them sold twelve men for a bottle of whisky. Others sold thirteen women for a mirror or a box of matches. True or false?

Fatima: (*into his face*) Answer the question, you modern slave trader.

[LAWANI flounders for an answer, finds none. Fishes out a small bottle of whisky from his pocket and drinks copiously.]
(Cemetery 125-26)

As the refrain in the chant-like dialogue, Africa is the constant in the changing history of exploitation. But it is evoked both as victim and as self-treacherous. Lawani is the contemporary incarnation of the African slave hunter, hypnotised by the temptations of the West and so transforming his kith and kin into merchandise. He is incapable of selflessness and therefore is incapable of allegiance to family, friends, or country; consequently, he personifies the condition that frustrates the country's aspiration to responsible nationhood.

Irobi also imagines Lawani as a modern Elesin Oba, head of the king's guards who must defend him to the death. However, in the postcolonial state, neither born to the self-sacrificial institution nor drawn to it by ideological persuasion; neither motivated by an enabling patriotic myth of divine origins of the nation and its kingship that deserve perpetuation nor inhibited by the dread of public censure of wilful treachery; lured instead by access to the power and the glory, in Lawani an institution that embodied the ideal of self-sacrificial patriotism degenerates to a modern religion of relentless self-worship, as seen in his dialogue with Somandina:

Lawani: [A]s a security agent I was trained in the United States. I am supposed to stand in front of the President if someone wanted to shoot or stab him. You saw how the American security agent stood in front of Ronald Regan when Hinkley tried to assassinate him in 1985. That is what I have been trained to do. Stop the bullet or knife with my chest. That is why I always wear a bullet proof-vest [sic].

[He tugs at the bullet proof [sic] vest concealed by his dress. Martial music begins, not loudly].

Somandina: What honourable job for someone who has any value for his life. And would you really stand in front of the president if someone wanted to shoot or stab him?

Lawani: (*grinning*) For where? In any case, we haven't got a President who is worthy of assassination or a sacrifice as priceless as my life. What the baboon out there

on the parade ground deserves is the electric chair or public execution by (*demonstrates*) strangling. He should be tried like Noriega for the same crime. (*straightening up*) In any case, I found the training in the U.S very useful. For my personal self-defence, that is. (*Cemetery* 80-81)

Lawani, however, rather ironically embodies the marks of the regime through whom he serves himself in spite of his lack of allegiance. His mutation in the imagination of the students who eventually lynch him, from one of the soldiers who arrest Mazeli to the one who tortured him and then to the President's surrogate, reflects his incarnation of the negative values of the regime and makes his murder of Mazeli not an accident, as he claims, but a representative act:

Lawani: Listen, it was an accident.

Amina: Was it also an accident when you arrested him in the morning?

Lawani: Look, I am not the he (sic) one who arrested him. I am his friend.

Amina: His friend? But you tortured him in the afternoon?

Lawani: Listen without me, he would have been tortured to death. I secured his release.

Amina: How can you secure his release when you are the President's chief security officer? His personal bodyguard.

Lawani: I don't think you can understand. Mazeli is my friend. It was an accident.

Amina: An accident? Your death will also be an accident.

A Student: We wanted to assassinate the president tonight. But since you are his bodyguard, you will take his place. (*Cemetery* 147)

Irobi, moreover, presents Mazeli's death as an eerie reenactment of Lawani's near mortal encounter with Somandina earlier on. This endows it with the gravity of both an inexorable pattern merely biding its time and a repeated rite, especially as Irobi associates it in its initial moment of enactment with the twofold emblems of military cannibalism, martial music and bestiality: "[*The martial music begins to blare assisted by sound effects of the howling of beasts.*]" (81). Lawani murders Mazeli in a reflex act of self-defence; he also dies in a typical attempt to protect himself. Lawani is incapable of allegiance to family, friends, and country because his intense self-infatuation blights even the ability to conceive of altruistic action. Lawani dies for himself while Mazeli is buoyed up at the approach of death by the awareness of his immortality: "Whatever happens, one thing I know for sure is that what I started will never stop [. . .] My students will carry it [the community theatre project] on. Already we have established base groups all over the state. And one day the men and women in this country will ride the horses of their own destiny" (48).

Mazeli and Lawani appear to embody the two preeminent modern attitudes to self-sacrifice. One is the political revolutionary's appropriation of the religious ideal which entails sacrificing personal well-being by assuming symbolic responsibility for communal transgressions and seeking to transform self-immolation into public good; the other is modernity's deep scepticism of the value of self-sacrifice. In this regard, Irobi's insights resonate with Eagleton's observation: "[M]odernity has regarded the self as too precious to be abandoned. If sacrifice blurs the bounds between life and death, conditions which most pre-modern cultures know to be on the most intimate of terms with each other, the modern will enforces an absolute distinction between them. Modernity regards self-possession as the enemy of self-realization, not its vital precondition, and so tends to buy its self-realization on the cheap" (*Holy* 129).

The violent death of a corrupt government functionary is replicated in the three plays Irobi presents to the audience of *Cemetery Road*. These are Lawani's death and its uncanny foreshadowing by the assassination of the President in the students' sketch that Mazeli rejects as well as the death of the official played by Abubakar Bappa in the joint project with the BBC correspondents. Mazeli devotedly revises the many possible endings of the last play but is dissatisfied with them all. However, motivated by the conviction of the crucial relationship between the theatrical experience and the lot of the student actors and thus of the necessity of a work with a serious vision of life and appropriate dramaturgy, Mazeli eventually considers as an inspired culmination the tragic ending he eventually adopts:

[They all resume their positions. He whispers ferociously into the ears of the PEASANTS. They start a war song and begin to circle round the OFFICIAL, pure murder stalling their faces. The song gathers momentum, its ritual energy pushing them to the brink of possession and accentuating the intensity of their intention. As they close in on him, aiming their daggers at different parts of his body, consciously ignoring the groin, the frightened OFFICIAL takes to his heels. They pursue him, corner him and, almost off stage, in "slow motion" stab him repeatedly until he drops dead. Over his jerking body they intone a dirge.] (42)

Mazeli's theatre, as he explains to Professor Madubunjoala, is aimed at teaching his students "the relationship between politics and the theatre" (*Cemetery* 77). Mazeli, in other words, aims to cultivate in his students a specific response to particular political situations. The measure of Mazeli's success and the students' acceptance of his models as paradigmatic is amply demonstrated in the sketch they create for the President and his entourage: "[The students bring out an effigy of the President, put it in a seat on stage. They fan out and work themselves up by chanting some murderous mantra, then, flash out their daggers

and stab it repeatedly into pieces]" (Cemetery 111). By replicating episodes in the plays-within-the-play in the primary play and similarly replicating historical episodes in the plays-within-the-play and the primary play itself, Irobi emphasises correspondences between theatre and reality. Thus, he adopts Mazeli as a surrogate through whom the espousal of his own revolutionary aesthetics is conveyed at some distance. Irobi's own stage direction on the death of Lawani recalls both Mazeli and Mazeli's conception of the fate of a failed public functionary: "[Accompanied by the drums the chant hots up. They circle round LAWANI. He tries to retreat. They corner him, surrounding from all sides. The song ebbs. [. . . Lawani] begins to unscramble the lock of his portfolio [to bring out a gun to defend himself]. In slow motion, they fall upon him with their daggers and stab him repeatedly until he dies]" (147-48).

Olu Oguibe's account of Irobi's turbulent relationship with some senior colleagues at the University of Nigeria Nsukka suggests a possible autobiographical template of Madubujoala's antagonism to Mazeli:

[Irobi's] prodigious talent, irrepressible garrulity, and seemingly affected eccentricity had not endeared him to some very powerful people at the university who made sure that he not only failed to graduate with first class honors, but that life would be miserable for him there as a graduate assistant. His mentor and distant kin, Professor Jas Amankulor, was away in the United States where he sadly met his untimely death through cancer. In Amankulor's absence Irobi was a fair target for his powerful adversaries, "imbeciles" as he often referred to them cursing under his breath, men who once were just as bright in their own youth, perhaps not quite as talented, yet full of energy and promise but who, with time, had lost the will to excel and eventually retired to the little fiefdom of the academy whence to wield their cudgels at the younger talents who reminded them of their earlier promise, and perhaps more poignantly, their failure to reach that promise. "Imbeciles," he would spit,

“absolute cunts! Scavengers loitering around looking for putrid flesh, accursed vultures!” They would have to feed on their own mothers’ flesh, he would say to me, not his. (n. pag.)

Irobi’s amused aspersion of the Nigerian soldiers’ consideration of their enumeration of the most basic outline of an educational history as professional intelligence gathering is indeed more insightful for its indication of important correspondences between the careers of Irobi and his protagonist:

First Soldier: (*Silence. He picks up Mazeli’s graduation photograph from the floor*)
You studied in England as well, didn’t you?

Mazeli: Yes, at Manchester.

First Soldier: (*still gazing at the photograph*) That’s where you did your PhD, wasn’t it?

Mazeli: Exactly.

First Soldier: And it was in Film and Theatre Arts, wasn’t it?

Mazeli: It was.

First Soldier: And you intend to go into film-making when the economy improves, isn’t that the case, Dr Anyanwu?

Mazeli: You seem to have a dossier on me, don’t you?

First Soldier: Of course, we do. We keep a dossier on on all intellectuals in this country. Especially those ones between the ages of twenty and forty. [. . .] Communists!

Mazeli: I am not a communist, Captain. I am an artist. An intellectual. A university lecturer. (*Cemetery 13*)

If “Leeds” is substituted for “Manchester,” the biographical sketch is indeed Irobi’s. Like his creator, Mazeli is a scholar,

playwright, stage director, theatre theorist and innovator, and shares Irobi's passion for film-making.³ The correspondences in Mazeili's and Irobi's career provide metacritical commentary on Irobi's practice in *Cemetery Road*.

In the Irobi oeuvre, the basic structure of *Cemetery Road* goes right back to *Hangmen Also Die*, which itself, in Irobi's early theatre career, is possibly indebted in crucial respects to Soyinka's *The Road* and Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. The initial episode is the logical close of the play that the entire drama is enacted to account for and illuminate. The "Opening glee" dovetails into the "Closing glee" and they make a paradoxical statement on the inevitability of the death as well as the immortality of the spirit of all who dare to assume the historical responsibility of challenging tyranny and extending the frontiers of human freedom. The rest of the play, divided into "cuts," adapts the technique of cinematic montage to suit Irobi's experimentations.

However, it is Irobi's audacious innovative use of the cinematic montage technique that continues to surprise the spectator at every stage. In his dramatic introduction of the performance idiom of the second "cut" and its constant modulation of performance medium, the "cut" is particularly illustrative. Insistent on knowing the contents of the contested tape after the soldiers' devastating visitation, Somandina "[hurls it violently on the floor. The tape jumps out of its case. Instantly, lights come up on the other stage at the back of the auditorium. It is the SARKI's palace. The audience are forced to turn their seats. The scene is bathed in blue lights]" (22). The cut begins like a filming in earnest of traumatised non-English speaking peasants of Bakolori. Irobi's emphasis at this stage is the writing of history and the inevitable ideological incongruence between official history and private accounts of the victims of historical events. The sharp disparities between the perspectives of the two BBC correspondents on historical documentations dramatise this conflict. One is new on the job and obviously

naively hankers after the chimera of truth as the substance of historical chronicles while the other is experienced in the exclusions and evasions that mediate history as official mythology:

First Blindman: I fell.

Second Blindman: We fell.

Chorus: (*blind men*): We fell.

Lead Singer: (*pointing*) We all lost our eyes in that battle, in that massacre.

Hazel: Who ordered the massacre?

Douglas: Cut! (*switches off the tape*) Hazel, you are going over the top.

Hazel: How?

Douglas: (*leaving the camera*) It is not our business who ordered the massacre.

Hazel: What then is our business? Just to document the disorder? (*pause*) Douglas, I think the viewers need to know the asshole who ordered that these people should be mowed down like cattle?

Douglas: And suppose it is the president of the country?

Hazel: (*angrily*) The world needs to know the bastard's name.

Douglas: (*alarmed*) Hazel!

Hazel: Isn't that what investigative journalism is all about?

Douglas: (*irate*) Listen, Miss Hazel Blunt. You must watch your language. I am directing this documentary. I determine what goes in and what stays out. And I want you to do just what I tell you to do. Right? Cut out the politics. And get the story out of them.

Even though you are new on this job,
 you should realize that you are not
 Mother Theresa. (*switches on the tape*)
 Tape rolling! (29)

The illusion of a documentary in earnest is sustained by Mazeli's brawl with the Official in the former's capacity as an advocate of the people and leader of their community theatre. This is ultimately shattered, however, upon the spectator's realisation that Mazeli only acts himself in the play, that the peasants are his theatre arts students, and that the documentary play is a virtual rehearsal session rather than a command performance. Irobi's emphasis at this stage turns to one of the greatest fascinations of his later career: drama as playing, art in the making, stripped of its trappings of polish and refinement, with all its clumsiness, hesitations, and imperfections, and with a potentially infinite number of versions vying for validation. By letting loose the ghosts of the only ostensibly dead versions of plays still in an active phase of construction to haunt the consciousness of the audience, Irobi sets in relief the aesthetic and ideological principles at play in the making of the work of art and the winnowing of what flashes of inspiration may bring. In this scheme of the play, Douglas is the embodiment of the philistine spirit with a keen eye for the exigencies and practicalities of the real world but no ear for the countless calls for the endless revisions the artist may necessarily heed in his approach to artistic perfection. In this regard, Mazeli's conflict with Abubakar Bappa playing the role of Official is transformed from the ideological battle between corruption and justice into aesthetic terms as a struggle between excellence and mediocrity.

But the "cut" again modulates its mode of performance towards its close as the action projected on the screen spills onto the stage with Mazeli's conflict with Douglas assuming the form of a contest over the authentic interpretation of the documentary play, a conflict emblematic of the contestation

for the hegemonic interpretation of African experience. However, that conflict, excluded from and even interrogatory of the scheme of the filmed documentary is pivotal for the development of the action of the primary plot. Presumably, wrestling with the constantly changing medium of performance, the incremental replications of episodes, and the contestations of contrasting narratives is consummate Brechtian technique. Irobi aims at mediating between the spectator's susceptibility to theatrical illusion and required social commitment. He reinvents Brecht, however, and extends his insights with a daring, authentic stamp of originality.⁴

The course of the development of Irobi's career complicates Femi Osofisan's contention that despite a common complexion and ancestral backcloth, the preoccupations of African writers living and publishing on the continent and those in exile in the diaspora do not necessarily converge. Based on this assumption, Osofisan constructs a tripartite category of African writers:

[W]hen we talk of African literature and its treatment of the subject of Identity, we must begin by breaking it down into three separate categories. The first would comprise the works written by Africans living in exile in the diaspora, and therefore published there. The second would be the literature produced by Africans, regardless of where they live, but which are written in response to some experience of racism in Europe and America, or have been commissioned by a Euro-American agency for performance in the West. And the third category would comprise the works written by those living and working in Africa, and mostly published in Africa, and which are written either in response to our ongoing socio-political disjunction or simply about the human relationships in it. (5)

Living and writing in Europe beginning from 1989 but continuing to publish in Nigeria, Irobi demonstrates the insufficiency of the Okri-Iyayi binary posited by Osofisan: "Ben Okri and Festus Iyayi are both Nigerians and both novelists.

Okri has been enormously successful in England, where Iyayi is unknown. But in Nigeria the situation is just the reverse, with Iyayi being the recipient of many ANA prizes, while Okri is known only by name and reputation, but hardly read. And of course there is a palpable difference in their styles and themes, because the experiences they wish to discuss, and the audiences they are addressing, are different" (5). Concerned with themes that range from the representation of Africans in the Western media to the failures of the Nigerian nation under military dictatorship and, winning the World Trust Award in the United Kingdom in manuscript in 1992 and the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Literature Prize in Nigeria in 2010 as a published text, *Cemetery Road* demonstrates Irobi's response to his dual heritage both in terms of dramaturgy and of the assumption of responsibilities.

Begun with great ambition at Nsukka in the 1980s, *Cemetery Road* incorporates themes that preoccupied Irobi in other works written at about the same period, such as *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of the Mask*, and *The Fronded Circle*. His signal insight is to integrate Nwokedi's revolutionary political activism with a deep interest in the performative and mystical traditions of the Igbo that had been the focus of his exploration of the Igbo culture in *The Other Side of the Mask* and *The Fronded Circle*. However, *Cemetery Road* also bears the ascertainable imprint of the circumstances of its author in the United Kingdom where it was completed: the enhanced awareness through experience of racism and the mythologisation of Africa in white imagination especially perpetuated by the Western media through ostensibly innocuous routine programmes. The play was also an arena for experimentation with varying concepts of theatricality and conception of the woman that will come to full flowering in his later work. The final word in the play is Somandina's and if the epilogue is a bit ornate and merely symbolic and her voice rather shallow, the female voice will be both strong and preeminent in Irobi's next play, *Sycorax*. But it

is the audacious and adventurous appropriation of all the relevant resources of the theatre, ancient and modern, that makes *Cemetery Road* a typical Irobi drama. Playing dangerously between the sacred and the profane, the macabre and the hilarious, the solemn rituals of the African mask and the exigencies of a theatre class, Irobi continues to extend the frontiers of his elemental drama, which we can in due course only designate as “Irobiesque.”

Chapter

5



De/Stabilising the European Classic: *Sycorax, Irobi's *The Tempest**

A continuing trend in the current re-evaluation of the European canon is the rewriting (and adaptation) of influential European plays by writers from the postcolonies. Varying in intent, sophistication, and methodology, such works are part of the core of the offerings of important African playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, Efua Sutherland, Ola Rotimi, and Femi Osofisan. A basic explanation for this phenomenon is these writers' recognition of a hidden polemic in narratives as well as their inherent malleability that makes restaging invaluable for both the interrogation of colonial representations and the invention of a new human image. The endeavour, however, is paradoxical, given the multiple theoretical and ideological implications arising from the colonised or former colonised author rewriting the master narratives of the colonisers or former colonisers.

Remarking on how Ancient Greek tragedies especially are recontextualised to foreground the postcolonial African condition, Margaret Williamson accounts for this by privileging the particular suitability of theatre for “endless potential for

restaging and recontextualizing fictional identities, including those assigned to its subjects by colonial power" (181). Kevin J. Wetmore in his important book *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* suggests that Greek tragic forms attract the attention of African playwrights, given the existence in ancient Greece and Africa of comparable mythical and epic traditions, anthropomorphic cosmologies, and spectacular ritual performances that the theatre could easily appropriate. However, Wetmore's thinking that Greek tragedy holds a fascination for postcolonial African playwrights, given that it is considered free of colonial taint, as it was "not originally part of the imperial cultures which colonized Africa" (2), fails eminently to account for the equally strong African tradition of adapting works by English playwrights, especially Shakespeare, for all their alleged imbrications in British imperialism.

The gaps in Wetmore's critically rewarding endeavour, often arising from overgeneralisations about global hybrid multiculturalism, again highlight the need for a rigorous investigation of delimited cultural and historical examples, while not losing focus of material and social coordinates in a more comprehensive postcolonial context. Regional and especially national investigations of rewritings, appropriations, translations, and adaptations of European classics easily reveal pitfalls in homogenising the African experience, disregarding the great diversity in cultural tastes and production as well as the form of the colonial encounter. Given the intense, complex multicultural nature of artistic production in Nigeria, a consequence in part of its local heterogeneous constitution and of the enduring cultural traffic with the outside world, a detailed, systematic study of adaptations of European classics in the country is not only viable, but indeed long overdue. Such a study will seek to account for Nigerian playwrights' paradoxical negotiation of tragedy, a literary form that, privileging a metaphysical framework, deals with the

ineluctable terms and conditions of the human fate, in a context that stresses contingent mutable historical forces and social situations. Three related issues will be focal in this discussion: the abiding paradox of the entrenchment of the canonical paradigmatic status of European texts by postcolonial writers' passionate search for corresponding experiences in their own cultures and artistic models; the larger and more overtly political issue, as Raymond Williams suggests, of the abiding capacity of the dominant hegemony to mark, neutralise, or incorporate a counterhegemonic threat; and distinctive Nigerian examples of hybridity arising from conflating myths of only approximate relationships and cultural models.

John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo inaugurated the enduring trend on the Nigerian stage of adapting Greek tragedies with his 1964 dramatic work, *Song of a Goat*, which without rewriting any specific Greek play illustrates "in title and action, that a tragic mode might be as indigenously African as it was Greek" (Wren 42). In his discussion of Soyinka's later *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, Isidore Okpewho underscores the pivotal influence of Clark-Bekederemo's example in noting that the play's conflation of the sexual and the sacrificial openly advertises its ties with the European classics and "neatly prefigures Wole Soyinka's own exploration of the same themes in his adaptation of Euripides's Dionysian play" (32). Ola Rotimi's rewriting of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* as *The Gods Are not to Blame* is another notable example of the rewriting of Greek plays by the "first generation" of Nigerian playwrights and, no doubt, its hegemonic faction. Femi Osofisan's *Tegoni, an African Antigone*, a rewriting of Sophocles's *Antigone* and his 2006 play *Women of Owu*, a rewriting of Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, are representative works of the continuing fascination that Greek plays hold for Nigerian playwrights of the "second generation."

Significantly, the Swedish Academy, in announcing the

award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986 to Wole Soyinka, underscored a kinship between his work and Shakespeare's that has hardly received full critical attention even when Soyinka has repeatedly identified Shakespeare as his favourite author. The Swedish Academy called Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* a "kind of African *Midsummer Night's Dream* with spirits, ghosts and gods. There is a distinct link here to indigenous ritual drama and to the Elizabethan drama" (425). Writing much earlier and in greater detail, Jonathan A. Peters had noted:

The obvious patterning after Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* is perhaps the first most striking feature of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*. Apart from the forest setting and the other-worldly atmosphere of the play, elements such as disguise, a prologue, a play-within-a-play, magical happenings involving gods, spirits and demons reflect a consanguinity with Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. (168)

This quite apart, however, Peters considers the differences between the plays more remarkable as the diaphanous lightness of Shakespeare's dream vision contrasts sharply with Soyinka's essentially disturbing tragic nightmare. Dan Izevbaye had equally drawn attention to the striking similarity between the name of Shakespeare's "Ariel" in *The Tempest* and Soyinka's "Aroni" in *A Dance of the Forest* and the role each plays in the penitential progress of the "three guilty humans" in each play under the instruction of Prospero or Forest Father, respectively ("Mediation" 117). For his part, Biodun Jeyifo contends that the link between *A Dance of the Forest* and *The Tempest* is even more pivotal, given Soyinka's extensive borrowing in plot and characterisation from the late Shakespearian play. Jeyifo considers Soyinka's achievement in this regard considerable, given the critic's recognition that African indigenous ritual drama and Elizabethan drama had been separated by the colonial ideology of "superior" and "inferior" races and cultures and by what he terms the overdetermined reactions of the

colonised to the effects of this colonialist, racist ideology (62).

The imaginative freedom of African folk art that privileges an enchanted terrain in which mortals, spirits, and monsters mingle, and where spells and magical invocations are vitalised and have potency has an affinity with the Shakespearean mode of the romance and makes a work like *The Tempest* generally rewritable in terms of the African imagination. Soyinka underscores this point in his article "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist" when he argues that Shakespeare's concern in the play is with "enchantment," not "history" (98). However, commenting on Ahmad Shaqui's 1927 rewriting of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Soyinka indicates an awareness of a possible politically motivated postcolonial appropriation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (that differs from his own use of the play in *A Dance of the Forest*): "The emendations are predictable; they are of the same political and historically conscious order as, for example, the reversal of relationships which takes place when the theme of Caliban and Ariel is handled by anyone from the colonial or slavery experience, most notably in the West Indies" (88). Parodic and interrogatory, Irobi's engagement with *The Tempest* falls into the postcolonial deconstructionist revisioning of the play that Soyinka alludes to.

Appraising the ideological significance of recent historicist Shakespearean scholarship, Michael Neill has noted:

It has helped us to understand the complex ways in which Shakespeare's writing was entangled from the beginning with the projects of nation-building, Empire and colonization; and by its uncovering of the processes through which Shakespeare was simultaneously invented as the 'National Bard' and promoted as a repository of 'universal' human values, it has shown how the canon became an instrument of imperial authority as important and powerful in its way as the Bible and the gun. In this way, it announced the possibility of a Renaissance that we could fashion to our purposes, instead of being passively fashioned by it—a

Renaissance in which the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries could be significantly relocated. (168-69)

As Shakespeare's representation of Europe's Others is pivotal in the revaluation of the Shakespearian canon, such plays as *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest* continue to be reread, soberly reappraised to illuminate Shakespeare's political positions and even his contribution to the formation of a racist and colonialist ideology. Chantal Zabus has remarked on the special place of *The Tempest* in the Shakespearian canon as a site of continuing contestations for meaning and power. Regarding the play, just like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Heart of Darkness* as an interpellative dream-text, Zabus contends that such texts serve as pre-texts to others that they underwrite, but notes that *The Tempest* has helped to shape three contemporaneous movements: postcoloniality, postfeminism or postpatriarchy, and postmodernism—from the 1960s to the present (1).

Zabus's insight is that the constant interrogation and alteration since the 1960s of Shakespeare's hierarchical positioning of Prospero, Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda in a power relationship have meant that the *Tempest*-protagonists have become contestants disputing a territorial niche in the larger critiques of representation:

In Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Australia, and Quebec, Caliban becomes the inexhaustible symbol of the colonized insurgent. In Canada and the Caribbean (after the "Calibanic" phase), Miranda revisits the Bardscript while, in African American texts, Sycorax embodies the threat of gynocracy. Both women characters as well as Ariel represent "Others," who potentially challenge patriarchy. Faced with this new order of things, Prospero, mostly in Britain and the United States, has to grapple with the eroding powers of his magic. As emblematic of postmodern Western man, he will have to negotiate with the other two factions while seeking to "return" in other guises. (2)

In Irobi's highly subversive rewriting of the play in which Shakespeare himself is a beleaguered character, the relocation of the site of power to both the female and History's "Others" is taken for granted; the central issue is the exposure of the ideological contagion of Shakespeare's magic itself and the emblematic divestiture of the Bard as the author(ity) par excellence on a universal human condition.

Irobi's adaptation of *The Tempest*, *Sycorax*, commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Theater USA and initially titled *The Shipwreck*, was intended to advance several aesthetic and polemical positions Irobi had taken in his recent preceding work, primarily an even more self-conscious modelling of his work on indigenous theatrical practices and an overt censure of colonialism for the failures of the postcolony. In *Sycorax*, Irobi's reading of *The Tempest* endorses a stern classic non-Western indictment of Shakespeare's play as an "unmistakable embodiment of colonialist presumption," a "foundational paradigm in the history of European colonialism" (Carttelli 89); it also implicates literary representations in the postcolonial crisis in the explicit manner begun in *Cemetery Road*, just as his location of the play in the Caribbean to link the African experience with the African diaspora is an amplification of the gestures towards a more comprehensive postcolonial scope and transcultural paradigm begun also in *Cemetery Road*.¹ His basic assumption in the play is that Shakespeare's narrative silences are ideological and aimed at the perpetuation of particular power relationships; that the silences privilege a version of the story as not only the canonical version but indeed as singular; that the silenced voices are latent, not lost, and could be empowered; and that such retrieved voices create a polyphony in which the varying shades of human subjectivity are discerned in all their nuanced and complex texture. He mines four centuries of resonant silences, murmurs, whispers, and hesitations to interrogate both Prospero's story and Shakespeare's play. Irobi's excavation of

Sycorax, especially, is, predictably, a revelation of a challenging archaeology of knowledge.

The "Author's Note" also indicates fundamental theoretical innovations in his approach to the creative process itself:

This adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* marks a new approach to my playwriting and theatre-making process. In the past I have written plays and directed them based solely on the vision and aesthetics I inscribed in the text. With *Sycorax* and subsequent plays, I now want to use the initial drafts of my plays as open maps and negotiating tools through which I allow actors and audiences in different parts of the world to participate, in a more democratic way, in the process of creating the performance text. After a number of productions, the final version of the play will then be published as evidence of a collaborative effort between me, the playwright, and the creativity of these other theatre makers who, for so long, have been subjected to the passive roles of subordinates and consumers, especially in the West. (5)

If this form of collaboration is not quite a novelty in the theatre, Irobi locates his model in the traditional African theatrical experience, as he emphasises "indigenous aesthetics and acting styles that are unknown to the Western-trained playwright, theatre director, actor or choreographer" (4). His theorisation of African oral performances and his appropriation of these in his earlier drama highlight the process of Irobi's translation of a written text using the paradigm and aesthetics of oral performance. Irobi's pivotal assumption in *Sycorax* (expressed by Caliban in his role as drama theorist and adapter) is that a dramatic text must have the capacity for self-renewal or lose social relevance: "Shakespeare's plays are not museum pieces. We cut and paste. We improvise. We change the narrative. We give *The Tempest* a new structure. A new imagination. A new life. We give it colour" (*Sycorax* 60). Irobi alludes to what he refers to as the "metamorphic quality" ("Taking" 186) of African

oral performances that enabled them to survive in the diaspora and enhanced both the survival of the African diaspora as well as their self-definition. Citing Wole Soyinka's incredible experience of the *bembe* of Saint Anthony in Cuba as virtual Ogun liturgy and music, Irobi highlights the survival patterns and the transformation that make the Ekpe festival recognisable in its evolution from Nigeria to Cuba as *Abakua* (187). As the Ekpe is Irobi's paradigmatic African indigenous performance art and available documentation of the Ekpe's transatlantic incarnation as Abakua is instructive, the subject deserves some attention.

Ivor Miller has identified Abakua as a nonproselytising, nontext-based *Cuban* institution initially for Cuban-born male descendants of Africans, established in 1836 on the model of West African Ekpe Societies of the Cross River region (164). However, by the process of creolisation, the society became more inclusive, admitting initially non-Calabari and later nonblack members and this "continual integration of the society by mulattos, Chinese, and whites meant that it reflected the diversity of Cuban society much earlier than any governmental institution" and became the embodiment of "Cuban ideals of rebellion and self-determination within a creole society" (Miller 171). Moreover, Abakua ceremonies based on performances of liturgical drumming, dancing, and chanting became a presiding influence of Cuban popular music as Abakua musicians integrated the polyrhythmic drumming traditions and other verbal and musical elements of Afro-Cuban religions to create the distinctive popular music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Miller 169). Miller concludes: "Africans in Cuba did die out, but many of their descendants (as well as those of European and Asian ancestry) maintained variants of African ancestral religious traditions by hiding them from the larger society. These cultural traditions, moreover, gained exposure during the Cuban Revolution, as political leaders framed the rebellious nature of nineteenth-century

anticolonial institutions like the Abakua as important building blocks upon which the revolution triumphed" (177).

On the continent also, Amankulor acknowledges both Ekpe's retention of its performance idiom as well as its transformation. Ostensibly paradoxically, he notes that the Ekpe festival has "retained the traditional and original attributes of *Ekpe*" (128) among the Umuode-Nsulu people of Abia State Nigeria but also accounts for the complex mixture of tragic and comic elements in the contemporary Ekpe festival as well as its reconceptualisation of sacrifice as a possible indication of its absorption of Christian influence (128). Writing more recently, Chukwuma Okoye cites Chinua Achebe to contend that the masquerade exemplifies Igbo aesthetics of cultural creativity as it retains its performance tradition while freely appropriating and staging influences from other cultures as well as embodying other art forms practised among the Igbo such as sculpture, music, painting, drama, costumery, and architecture. Okoye argues about the masquerade: "What is particularly notable is its expropriatory attitude towards Western culture that it considers simply as a source of expressive resources, an access to more diverse and often newer means of negotiating its own rapidly changing aesthetic landscape" (27). He stresses that such appropriated cultural elements are used for the construction of a performance model that is consistent with Igbo vision of life and art.

Irobi indeed acknowledges the complex web of correspondences and intricate interdependence of the various art forms among African people. Sculpture, music, carving, are not only codes of mythological and religious values, they are also intrinsically related to theatrical performances: "In the sculptures, choreography, drum languages, verbal poetry, masquerade forms [. . .] are coded the people's myths, narratives of origin, manifestations of their gods and ancestors, values and ontological concepts which shape the structures and dynamics of their other art forms such as mime, dance, drama

and theatre" ("Taking" 180). This dense and composite multivalency of a typical oral Igbo performance is a crucial aesthetic component of Irobi's translation of *The Tempest* as it is his conviction that the play is comparable to an ancient myth in dire need of an audacious reinterpretation to regain relevance. Where, then, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has been highly praised for its virtual structural perfection, confining "its action to one place, to three hours, and to a closely related group of characters" (Kermode 176), in *Sycorax*, Irobi adopts a loose carnival-like structure reminiscent of the dance-drama model he achieved a mastery of in *Nwokedi*. Indeed, in *Sycorax*, the compact between the audience and the actors is more intensely consummated through music, and the theatrical experience is recreated in terms of the conviviality of the festive atmosphere to which it has often been traced. At the initial entrance of Caribbean (Irobi's transformation of Shakespeare's Caliban also variously referred to as Carry Boy, Sugar Cane, Emperor Haile Selassie,) and his music band, the stage direction reads:

Caribbean's band is nearer and louder now. They are singing "This is the land of my birth" with gusto. [Sycorax] listens, smiles, and begins to walk towards him. The audience follows. When the crowd meet the band the music becomes louder and joyous and Caribbean's singing more ecstatic. The audience members join in singing and dancing as cool drinks are handed out to everybody by members of the band. (13)

Shortly after, the celebration reaches its peak: "*He increases the volume of the music. It is dance hall music, mind-blowing in its ecstasy and pelvic thump. As the audience rocks and the women begin to do provocative variations of "the butterfly" with their groins. . .*" (17). The space that separates the audience from the actors is recognised as ideological and is consequently eroded; questions are deliberately aimed to elicit audience response, and actors mingle with the audience shaking hands and acting roles among them. "Audience participation,"

predictably, is at the core of the aesthetic incongruence between Caribbean's version of *The Tempest* and the Royal Shakespeare Director's "highbrow" version:

Director: [. . .] Tell me, what is going on here? The lines that you have been speaking are not Shakespeare's lines, are they? We did not cut Prospero's and Miranda's lines during rehearsals, did we? And I did not ask you to adlib, did I? Where did you get the scripts you are using tonight?

Miranda: (*pointing*) From Sugar Cane [. . .]

Prospero: He gave us the impression that you told him that our first scene, as William Shakespeare wrote it, is too wordy and too boring.

Sycorax: Then, this evening, in a pub along Henley Street, he taught us the song we were singing.

Prospero: He said it would liven up the play.

Miranda: Lessen the tedium of dialogue.

Prospero: Redeem the play from its verbiage . . .

Miranda: Draw the audience in.

Prospero: Make them ecstatic.

Miranda: Encourage audience participation.

Director: Audience participation? What, the hell, does he think a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Tempest* is? Nottinghill Gate Carnival? Another Brixton Riots? Audience participation, my arse! (52-54)

Irobi traces this disparity in aesthetics to an African "epistemology of the theatrical event" fundamentally contrasted from the European: "This difference lies in ontology and social

ideology. African and African diasporic communities, until recently, have always predicated themselves on the ethos of communality while Europe and its diaspora have largely foregrounded an individualistic purview of life. Theatre in the African and African diasporic imaginary rotates around this ideal of community. Theatre is primarily an act of community by which a given group ritualizes and perpetuates its sense of identity, its values, history, performance aesthetics and sense of spirituality as a basis for continuity" ("Theory of Ase" 15)

Brian Crow's restatements of the aims of Brechtian theatre (in his effort to interrogate, as he claims, the usually unquestioned conflation of Brechtian and traditional African performance aesthetics) are as typically insightful as his differentiations of Brechtian aesthetics from the African are characteristically Eurocentric, intellectually continuous with the legacy of *The Tempest* that Irobi debunks. Crow identifies as a basic element of Brecht's conception of Epic spectatorship "an intellectually (and even emotionally) alert audience, which is enabled through the drama's formal devices or techniques to see anew by a process of 'estranging' what has become familiar and taken for granted, thus provoking audience awareness that character and action is always embedded in, and in large measure produced by, causal socioeconomic structures" (191). Brecht's aim, Crow aptly notes, was "to alter radically the nature of property relations in the theater, as in society at large, so that the working class audience would own the theater as a means of production, and would be able to use the theatrical representation of reality for their own, revolutionary purposes" (193). In African audiences' "rapacious hunger" for "stimulation and response" as in their "volatile" responses to a performance (192), Crow is willing to discern an instinctive African fulfilment of some of Brecht's aspiration towards a new audience. But that is only to the extent that Brecht desired "a theatre audience that does not sit silently in the dark, transfixed by illusion, but behaves more like a crowd

at a football or boxing match—relaxed but alert, able and willing to participate actively as they watch” (Crow 192). However, this ostensible affinity quite apart, Crow identifies a typical African resistance to Brecht’s “double seeing,” that is, a deeply ingrained African inability to appreciate dialectical relationships in “complex and uneasy tension” with the quintessential “Brechtian impulse” (192).

But Brecht’s aesthetics does not have to be a universal norm! It is thus intriguing to evaluate practices that predate Brecht by invoking his aesthetics as a set of universally transcendent and valid set of paradigms. Yet based on this universalist assumption, Crow proceeds occasionally to concede approvingly in African spectatorship the presence of a “broadly Brechtian impulse” while fundamentally regretting inhibitory characteristic un-Brechtian African responses. Crow’s attitude is symptomatic of monocultural self-absorption and presumptuousness. The justification for acknowledging cultural affinities cannot always be to present deviations from the European model as calamities. Irobi’s maximisation of the African practice is consistent with his demonstration in the play of the primacy of performance over text and the constant need to revision and reposition the text by charging it with contemporary (topical) inflections in performance basically through various audience interventions and music.

The African festival mode that is Irobi’s model of a dance-drama is a complex invocation of multiple “artistic media orchestrated to a common purpose at once spiritual and serious, playful and entertaining. It is in their nature to be meaningful on several levels [. . .] The well-staged festival brings everyone into its ambience” (Cole 12). The kind of festival notwithstanding, there are both variations and repetitions of moments or phases that emphasise solemnity and those that stress gaiety, those in which the mood of jubilation is celebrated and that elicit theatrical virtuosity as well as sober moments that evoke pathos or religious mystery: to recognise

the distinctions and to be able to respond appropriately is to be a knowledgeable participant. Cole, who observes that the complexity of the festival makes it rather confusing to a stranger, nonetheless concedes its decorum and unity and recognises the centrality of music and dance among the structural devices that link the apparently loose, interweaving, and overlapping hundreds of disparate threads. Making a comparison between two processions in the same African festival, he highlights differences in audience role: "Adding complexity and textural richness to the prescribed processional order and its core of essential participants, the 'audience'—now onlookers, now active participants—lent an air of informality and bustling interaction with the main actors. A considerable amount of unexpected, unprogrammed action—dance, gesture, song and other random activity—marked this procession, a contrast to the more formalized and larger procession of chiefs next day" (18). Music and dance also in their varying but repeated manifestations, providing structural coherence and opportunity for self-expression, both define and add colour to the festival.

In making Caribbean a musician, demonstrating and appropriating the rallying and transformative powers of music, Irobi not only ascribes agency to him; he consciously responds to Shakespeare's representation of Caliban in *The Tempest* as Shakespeare's striving to create an enchanted enclave removed from the routine of everyday life equally stresses music. Magic after all coexists with incantations and ritual. But in making even his half-human half-monster character, Caliban, appreciative of the musical enchantment of the island, Shakespeare does not merely intend to complicate further the shifting locale of the action of the play; nor does he mean to demonstrate Caliban's access to the humane sensibility to music; he inscribes music as a basic element in the general atmosphere of magic, obvious even to a moon calf. This is because, for Caliban, music complicates and perpetuates his

bondage by evoking a delusory haven whose distractions regulate his investment in the real world of his colonisation:

The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds me thought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me: that, when I wak'd,
I cried to dream again.

(3.2. 130-38)

Irobi's reading of *The Tempest* emphasises that Prospero's characterisation of Caliban as a monster, Sycorax as a witch, and Ariel as an elf does not have to be read merely as metonymic of Prospero's refusal to acknowledge as human the indigenes of the territory he desired to colonise; it reveals instead *Shakespeare's* representation of Europe's Others. Refusing to use Shakespeare's script for his role as Caliban, Sugar Cane argues (with the Director privileging a possible theme of enchantment) that *The Tempest* is basically about race:

Sugar Cane: Race! Shakespeare's representations of race! (*pause*) His unquestioned misrepresentations of other races of the world including my own race!

Director: Sugar Cane, *The Tempest* is about magic, the magic of the theatre, rapture, wonder, beauty, *virtue*.

Sugar Cane: Yes, like Miranda, a virgin. Ariel, an angel. Prospero, the Alpha and Omega of the universe. With power over life and death on the island. But Caliban? Caliban is a monster. A smelly, cursed,

deformed, monstrous thing. (*bitterly*) A thing of darkness! A slave and savage who babbles like the natives on the banks of the Congo river in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. (*Sycorax* 40)

Echeruo discerns in the rhetoric of *The Tempest* a revelation of the European mind, given the play's naturalisation of colonialism and racism, and argues that Shakespeare was a true Elizabethan in his rigorous endorsement of the prevailing European boundaries of kinship:

Racism—the practical affirmation of species-specific difference—is the denial of the possibility of other than final boundaries. Racism draws a line between races beyond which it will not extend the courtesies of kinship. Racism—like like anti-Semitism—does not need to deny the “humanity” so called of its victims. Shylock's appeals to human conscience are rhetorically astute and have been cited often as evidence that Shakespeare cared for the humanity of his character. But that is not the point at all. Racism and anti-Semitism exclude their victims from the community of its accepted kinsmen. Racism is that marking of ultimate boundary lines. (“Shakespeare” 2)

Echeruo shows the process by which Caliban is placed beyond kinship and consequently with his tribe pushed beyond the pale of humanism's grace.

Caliban's rebelliousness in *The Tempest* notwithstanding, the *authorised* pattern of growth conceded to him is not towards a transcendence of his situation; Shakespeare's prescribed wisdom for Caliban is instead inscribed as the recognition of the coloniser's divinity and thus the absolute acceptance of enslavement: “I'll be wiser hereafter and seek for grace” (5.1.295-96). Paul Brown has noted the representation of “Caliban's resistance to colonisation as the obdurate and

irresponsible refusal of a simple educative project" (220). It is Irobi's contention that far from validating Mannoni's myth of dependency complex, Caliban in his contemporary incarnation would seek to destroy the archives of Western knowledge as the true source of the coloniser's sorcery and aspire to rewrite history. Caliban discerns in "Goethe, Kant, Carlyle, Hulme, Jefferson [. . .] classics of Western philosophy" (*Sycorax* 102) an account of the formation of Western consciousness of itself and its Others and, in seeking to burn and rewrite them, aspires to inaugurate a new world order. His willingness to blow himself up as a suicide bomber alongside Prospero is metonymic both of his will to that revolution and the general temper of contemporary Calibans.

Irobi designates his "new" theory of theatre-making "Akpankro," and identifies it as an Igbo concept that "encourages the maximum participation of the entire community thereby breaking down barriers of class, wealth, age, gender, race, and Western education" (5-6) and locates it in opposition to "Western mainstream, commercial theatre [as it offers] a more *inclusive* option to the *exclusive* and insanely expensive middle-class, proscenium peep-shows currently marketed on Broadway and the West End" (*Sycorax* 7). In his "Akpankro" theatre-making technique, Irobi discerns the capacity to recuperate "submerged female identities, presences, epistemes of performance in our theatre histories and aesthetics" (*Sycorax* 6) and sees in *Sycorax* an experiment that "will facilitate greater grassroots theatrical participation among working class peoples of African descent" (6). There is the problem, though, that there may well be a gap here in Irobi's theory. "Akpankoro," to the extent that it actually derives from the Igbo performative heritage, designates a childhood game possibly in the category of "Hide and Seek" and hardly seems a site to empower feminist and class struggles. Irobi obviously envisions the excavation of a stigmatised colonised woman and privileging her narrative voice as a model of female

empowerment but hardly relates this to the traditional nursery performance, "Akpankoro." However, in the process of his rehabilitation of Sycorax, he extends the frontiers of transgressive appropriations of *The Tempest* whose effacement of indigenous women warranted Bowen's speculation that "part of *The Tempest's* attraction even for writers within radical political movements is that it figures colonialism as a relationship between men" (82).

For a character long dead before the beginning of *The Tempest*, Sycorax remains a significant haunting presence. Prospero speaks about her in absolute terms to suggest both the ultimate physical ugliness and spiritual evil: she was a "foul witch" "who with age and envy / Was grown into a hoop" (1.2.258-60); a "damned witch" (1.2.264); a "blue-eyed hag" (1.2.270). Prospero, however, could not deny her considerable powers though he alleged it was "black magic": "a witch so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs, / And deal in her command without her power" (5.1.269-71). To what extent, though, this anxious assessment is only a projection is unclear. Ania Loomba argues that Sycorax is "Prospero's 'other'; his repeated comparisons between their different magics and their respective reigns of the island are used by him to claim a superior morality, a greater strength and a greater humanity, and hence legitimize his takeover of the island and its inhabitants; but they also betray an anxiety that Sycorax's power has not been fully exorcised" ("Gender" 328). Prospero's account of Sycorax's expulsion from Argier is silent on why her life was spared in spite of her unnameable sorceries: "For one thing she did / They would not take her life" (1.2.266-67). If Prospero exalts the virtues for which his own life and Miranda's were spared in similar circumstances, his silence on Sycorax probably occludes her unnameable virtue. Moreover, Caliban demonstrates the possibility of a Sycorax hagiography both in invoking the mother in his famous claim of the island as his patrimony and in his invocation of

the mother's supernatural powers against Prospero as potent forces.

Harry Garuba has remarked on how the peculiar geographical location of islands seems inherently to evoke the binary oppositions of centre and margin, metropole and periphery, self and other and thus privileges it as a trope for figuring the opposition between a "Civilisational Other" and the West (62). However, interrogating the hegemonic Western practice to totalise island narratives, Garuba stresses the necessity

to recall first that island narratives are not always constructed from the point of view of the adventurer, explorer, or colonist and that not all of these narratives point in a direction 'always *away from home* (and back)' in that Eurocentric sense; and to recognize that there are island narratives constructed from other positions, such as one in which the island itself is home, the center in which the narrators and characters live their lives and maybe sometimes return to after their own voyages outside. A recognition of this will further lead to an acknowledgement of the fact that there are always multiple determinations to individual and collective subjectivity, and that no matter how powerful and compelling one determinant is, it never entirely erases all others. (63)

In *The Tempest*, Prospero's ambition to remain master is linked with his desperation to entrench his story of the island as inviolable and to project the stigma of lies unto any rival narrative. In *Sycorax*, narratives of the island proliferate, occasionally overlapping and converging, at times enigmatically Other and intriguing, and often too wilfully manipulated to validate and authorise claims to power. *Sycorax's* narrative is expectedly privileged.

Irobi conceives of *Sycorax* as the archetypal autochthonous indigene, incarnating the three cardinal phases of the history of colonised peoples: the precolonial, the colonial, and the

postcolonial. Refuting "Shakespeare's" claim that she was his creation, Sycorax instead lays claim to the timelessness of myth: "I am the pearl of the Atlantic Ocean, the oyster of the Caribbean sea and the jewel of the Antilles. I am older than the British Empire and more beautiful than the English language. I am Sycorax, daughter of Queen Ioana ruler of the Antilles centuries before Christopher Columbus started floundering across the globe in search of India" (*Sycorax* 71-72).² Debunking the coloniser's myth that language is his gift to the colonised, she demonstrates instead how colonial language is wilfully complicit with mythmaking and the perpetuation of ideological falsehood. Her etymology of the "West Indies" is instructive. East of India, the "West Indies" nonetheless retains its name in deference to a colonial explorer's narrative and in defiance of geography and cartography; its inexplicable continuing usage even by the indigenes of the place to name themselves is a subtle indication of the power of colonial mythmaking. Sycorax's rehabilitation project is thus driven by the redefinition of concepts and by the transvaluation or reclamation of values strategically stigmatised by the coloniser's language: "Sycorax in our Caribbean language means the salvager. I salvage things from the jaws and appetites of the ocean. Ships, boats, canoes, pieces of wood, even drowning men" (*Sycorax* 8). Her declaration of the source of her power contests age-long racist and colonialist ideologically charged perceptions and inscriptions of colour and value: "With my black magic! [. . .] the power of the undiscovered vowels of the lost alphabets from the Caribbean abacus" (*Sycorax* 25). Sycorax's claim of the status of salvager resonates with her first appearance on stage, "*armed with a two-headed axe [. . .] swinging away at the bole of a large sea grape tree*" (*Sycorax* 8) to set free a victim of witchcraft. The image of a formidable rescuer links Sycorax with the Amadioha mythology of Irobi's previous plays in which the deity of thunder and justice is associated with the axe and deploys lightning for both punitive

and redemptive purposes. The strong mythic element of the narrative strengthened by *obeah* ritual incantations and conjurations recreates the otherworldly undercurrent of Shakespeare's play that Irobi appropriates for a dominantly political purpose. In this regard, correspondences between Irobi's play and Aimé Césaire's earlier adaptation, *A Tempest*, are insightful.

A founding father of the Negritude movement, Césaire embraced the theatre for its potentials as a popular form of cultural expression for staging the politics and poetics of the movement. Citing Laville, Robert Eric Livingston articulates Césaire's conception of theatrical performance and that of his French director, Jean-Marie Serreau, in terms that strikingly anticipate Irobi's approach to performance:

For Surreau, the theatrical experience was more moveable feast than bounded representation, an occasion for spectacle more than a dutiful institution of culture. Incorporating music, song, dance, choral movement, political satire and audiovisual technology, Serreau crossed Brecht with McLuhan to envision a mobile theatre for the global village. "The social festival which is the theatre," he wrote, "should assemble all the various modes of expression: music, cries, dancing, each one expressing what the others can't express. This continual alteration is what constitutes the spectacle." (184)

Césaire concurs: "For me, song, and dance are not opposed, and I don't choose between them. I don't believe there is one kind of art especially apt for conveying political conflict. For me theatre is a complete, total art. Theatre can integrate poetry, dance, folklore, storytelling; it's an art of synthesis and integration" (qtd. in Livingston 196).

Livingston is right to discern in Caliban's invocation of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, in his work-song and in the marching-song of his rebellion an attempt by Césaire to ground Caliban's defiance in African culture (193). On the

other hand, Livingston's reading of the apparition of the Yoruba trickster-god, Eshu, as "the recovery of African cultural and psychic authenticity," given the god's alleged resistance to a bloodless Western classical ceremony (194) is certainly not grounded on any ascertainable African culture. Intriguing as Césaire's characterisation of the god is, Eshu's disruptive irruption affirms the presence of the denied Other just as his ribald nuptial song privileges the body in a conjugal celebration. He is a reminder of the carnality that Prospero would rather deny but which marriage after all celebrates and perpetuates. Irobi invokes no Eshu figure in his constant evocation of human sexuality in *Sycorax*. However, in making his Caliban elect for suicide bombing in terms anticipated by Césaire's Caliban, the African playwright very probably acknowledges an insight deriving from his Caribbean predecessor even if his own rewriting of *The Tempest* is more subversive.

Caliban's affirmation of Sycorax's immortality in Césaire's play and his association of his mother with a possible earth cult find some resonance in Irobi's play. In response to Prospero's consideration of Sycorax's death as auspicious in *A Tempest*, Caliban says: "Anyhow, you only think she's dead because you think the earth itself is dead. . . It's so much simpler that way! Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth, because I know that it is alive, and I know that Sycorax is alive" (12). In *Sycorax*, Miranda cites Caliban to proclaim Sycorax's indestructibility: "[. . .] Sycorax will rise again. That's what Caliban told me. She is indestructible" (90). Miranda's portrait of Sycorax as a healer extends her mystical association with the earth just as it confirms Sycorax's claims about being a salvager and refutes Prospero's deliberate demonization of her: "[Sycorax] knew the name of every single plant and root in this island. Loved to cure illnesses and diseases. She was a healer. And like a mother to me. Used to carry me in her arms and sprinkle the juice of strange herbs on me each time I had

a fever or cold. (*pause, tears come to her eyes*) She loved me very much" (Sycorax 88). She corroborates Sycorax's account of the sexual origins of Prospero's antagonism to Sycorax and so underscores the latter's "post-Freudian" equation of sex and power: "Men's *inordinate* quest for *inordinate* power usually starts with an inadequacy in the pubic region" (Sycorax 132). Prospero's acquiescence in this version of the story is highlighted. If the drunken Italian mariners provide highly inconsistent and consumable tales of Prospero in Italy, tracing his banishment variously to political ineptitude, sorcery, plagiarism, sodomy and the murder of his wife, Sycorax's more sober account of his initial travails on his banishment and arrival on the island is corroborated by Prospero:

Sycorax: Prospero, do you recall in what wretched state you were in when you came to this island?

Prospero: I do!

Sycorax: How I, Sycorax, used my magical powers to bring your leaking boat to anchor safely in the eastern bay of this beautiful island?

Prospero: I know all that.

Sycorax: How I redeemed you from playing with yourself seven times a day.

Prospero: (*vehemently*) Three times a day, Sycorax, three times, not seven.

Sycorax: How you used to creep like a rat at night to steal some of my food.

Prospero: The food was not for me! It was for my daughter.

Sycorax: (*silence*) How I stopped you from breastfeeding your motherless daughter with your third breast? Do you remember? (*Prospero turns away.*) You took away her childhood, Prospero. Took

away the beginnings of her womanhood.
 Stole her innocence. That's why she
 rebelled against you. And sided with your
 enemies. (*He tries to escape. She follows
 him, forces him into a chair; pushes his
 face into place to face her.*) I stopped you
 from molesting the poor girl, didn't I?
 Taught you the ecstasies of adult sex,
 Prospero, did I not? (*Sycorax* 133-35)

Irobi is keen not to recreate Prospero primarily as a demiurge but to present him as a *human being* and thus to speculate on how he negotiated his sexuality in the enchanted island. The interest in human sexuality, which is manifest in the obsessive sexualisation of language and the democratisation and legitimisation of diverse sexual inclinations, marks the entire play as "post-Freudian"; it also makes the concern with the fitting language of cultural appropriations of Shakespeare only an aspect of the larger question of the proper language of playing Shakespeare in the modern world.

In his treatment of sex, Irobi clearly has in mind colonial myths of the black man's uninhibited libido that the playwright had drawn attention to in *Cemetery Road*. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban does not even have to deny attempting to force Miranda; Shakespeare's initial audiences firm in their conviction of the validity of the myth of the rampaging black man were unlikely to believe him anyway. In *Sycorax*, Ferdinand talks about "Claribel, my cock-struck sister, who married the King of Tunis. A black man . . . with a penis the size of . . . this axe" (89). Miranda's description of Sycorax is also subtly implicated in racist stereotype: "Big bouncing, beautiful, large-breasted, black woman with buttocks the size of two breadfruits. Had an abundant joy for life and a cry of orgasm you could hear from one corner of this island to the other" (*Sycorax* 88).

Ironically, Irobi's own evocation of Sycorax at the end of the play in her apotheosis as a sexual healer hardly avoids implication in this stereotyping process. Otherwise, Irobi is relentless in his reversal of racial and colonial stereotypes in the play. Miranda's precarious virginity is interrogated by her subjection of an uninterested Caliban to temptations and her confession to an incestuous relationship with her father, Prospero; Prospero is bisexual with both Sycorax and Ariel as lovers, killing the former and imprisoning the latter in the trunk of a tree on discovering that they were dating; Stephano and Trinculo openly acknowledge they are gay and lovers, though the latter is also susceptible to feminine charms; and Prospero's plan of a dynastic marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda founders as Ferdinand confesses to Ariel that he is gay. Ariel's repetition of Prospero's injunction to Ferdinand and Miranda to chastity in *The Tempest* in *Sycorax* is insistently mocked by the heavy freight of obscenities in his language, except that the obscene is indeed extinct in Irobi's evocation of a modern sexual revolution whose pervasiveness marked language conspicuously. That Irobi, however, does not designate a general human condition but a distinctive Western development is illustrated in the dialogue between Caliban and the Mariners:

- Stephano: Who are you?
 Caliban: My name is Caribbean.
 Trinculo: Cannibal? (*bares his teeth*)
 Caliban: No! Bwana Darwin! I am Caribbean!
 This island is mine. Who are you?
 Stephano: We are Europeans.
 Caliban: Flotsam and jetsam from the shipwreck?
 Trinculo: No. We are the Magi.
 Caliban: From the West?
 Stephano: Yes, from the West! (*stretches out his hand for a handshake*) My name is Stephano.
 (*Caliban ignores his hand*)
 Trinculo: (*brings out his hand*) Mine is Trinculo.

We are civilized.

Stephano: Very civilized.

Caliban: (*Caliban also ignores his hand, smiles*) I can see that already. Your civilized credentials are flapping about your knees like a cave man's hunting clubs. What were you doing under my blanket?

Trinculo: We were taking European civilization to a higher, transcendent level...

Caliban: Through fornication?

Stephano: Yes, through fornication. Before you disturbed us! (*Sycorax 100-01*)

Irobi dramatises how the grandiose European self-image under the sober gaze of its Others is refracted in all its moral decadence and wretchedness. Mimicry, parody, and the reversal of roles assigned to its Others by Europe are the vehicles of Irobi's contention that the decadence of the West far exceeds the barbarism it ascribed to its Others. This is underscored by the implication of two iconic Western institutions in either the sexual orgy itself or its linguistic adulation or possibly both, as indicated in the references to the sexual crisis even in the Church and the making of "Shakespeare" both an embodiment of this pagan ideal and its ultimate poet.

In making "Shakespeare" adept in the new sexualised language, Irobi speculates on what *The Tempest* would read like if (re-)written today. His basic assumption is that the work of art being invariably a product of particular historical circumstances and contexts would be marked by its contemporary worldliness. Irobi's resurrected "Shakespeare" calls the contemporary world a "ball of fire" and remarks: "The cemetery is a more peaceful place than the present" (*Sycorax 141*). Informed that *The Tempest* "has been used as an affidavit of European civilised superiority to enslave, murder, maim, lynch and rape millions upon millions of people from other parts of the world since 1611" (*Sycorax 79-80*). Irobi's

"Shakespeare" comments on "a defect in the human race" and identifies whites as "the cancer of the human race" (*Sycorax* 80). His account of the insurrections sweeping the world in a new epilogue intended to update the discourse of *The Tempest* is the recognition of a paradigm shift:

Time, like a metronome, has swung its dial of power from the North to the South. The knowledge and the power we the Prosperos of the West thought was ours and ours forever have now migrated to the Ariels, the Sycoraxes, the Seteboses, Calibans, Trinculos and Stephanos of the world. And, I tell you, they will use it. (142)

Irobi sets in relief the relentless dynamism of life and history that invariably makes even iconic works of art dated and thus stresses revisioning as a necessary interventionist measure to revivify a work's relevance. He contests the ideal of the unchanging Bard of Avon with eternal and universal prescience on a changeless and essentialist human condition and suggests instead "a universal genius" whose work different generations and different cultures can appropriate for their own purposes. Rewritings invariably illuminate the original text by revealing layers of latent but cogent meanings: *Sycorax* is Irobi's contemporary *The Tempest*.

Irobi draws on controversies in Shakespearian scholarship to foreground the "constructedness" of the play; to reappraise the venerable myth of the work of art as infallible divine revelation that Shakespeare himself entrenches in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and to insinuate that the possibility of interferences in the course of production of texts potentially erodes the authority of the author and even influences the intended vision. The fierce struggle between *Sycorax* and "Shakespeare" for the final authority to assign a passage to a character speculates on the possible impact of controversial editorial interferences as well as directors' own idiosyncrasies on the irretrievable original Shakespearian intention:

- Sycorax: When Miranda says “thy vile race . . . in which good natures could not abide to be with . . .,” who is she referring to?
- Shakespeare: (*bristling*) That is not Miranda’s speech.
- Sycorax: (*flaring up, they sit him down*) I don’t give a fuck whose speech it is! All I want to know is who are you referring to as “the vile race”?
- Shakespeare: (*stubbornly*) I insist that that is not Miranda’s speech!
- Sycorax: Whose is it?
- Shakespeare: Prospero’s. Who the hell gave it to Miranda?
- Sycorax: It’s published here as Miranda’s? See? (*Rips out the page and shows it to him*)
- Shakespeare: (*irate*) That fucking scrivener, what is his name? Ralph Crane! . . . messed up my entire manuscript and called it printing. What is this but vandalism at its creative best. I think that Crane should be whipped...publicly with grains of salt on his naked buttocks! (*reads*) Thy vile race! (*sweating*) That is Prospero’s speech . . . (*Sycorax* 77)

Irobi’s sustained irreverence to Shakespeare indicates that he does not exonerate the Bard nonetheless. Sycorax’s contention has authorial sanction: the identity of the vilified race (as well as the implications of that vilification for that race) is infinitely more crucial to those at the fringes of Shakespeare’s constituency than some of the exemplary scholarly pontification of some Shakespeare experts at the centre on mere irrelevancies. Irobi’s occasional conflation of the identities of Shakespeare with that of Prospero and the

RSC Director and the latter with his racist wife is telling. He not only contests Shakespeare's representations of Europe's Others; he also engages with the formidable institutions of production, transmission, and interpretation that occlude the political imperative in the plays and thus perpetuate the versions of Shakespeare that marginalise Europe's Others.³ Texts invariably embody ideologies and often invite particular readings. But the basic necessity of conflict in the generation of action in the plot of many stories implies the existence of contending though unequal voices. Thus institutions of interpretation do not only privilege or reify particular ideologies when there are potentially conflicting readings; they even pass off the ideological process of canonising particular readings as a disinterested scholarly endeavour.

In *Sycorax*, the RSC Director recognises the necessity for innovative approaches to playing Shakespeare. Dismissing as sheer racist myth the belief that blacks are "too thick for Shakespeare" and so prefer carnivals, he elects for a multicultural cast for his version of *The Tempest*, hoping "at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to dispel the myth that black actors cannot do Shakespeare because of the size of their lips and shape of their teeth" (*Sycorax* 29-30). As a revivification of the tenuous relationship between aesthetics and politics, the Director's indication of the link between the playing of an actor on stage and the daring of a suicide bomber on the streets is truly audacious and meant to inspire a production of *The Tempest* that challenges the orthodox model that his wife wishes perpetuated:

Of all of Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest* is my favourite. That's why I don't want it vulgarized by your so-called actors of color. When I was at Central school of Speech and Drama about twenty years ago, before marriage, pregnancy, and three children ruined my acting career, I starred in a West End production of the play. As Miranda. (*with an ecstasy that belongs to a different age*) I was Miranda! One of the

best Mirandas ever seen on the English stage since 1611 when the play was written. (*her face begins to glow with the halo of a lost glory*) In that production, there were no Africans, no Asians, no Caribbeans, no immigrants of any shade or colour. Only whites. Even Caliban was white! And the actor playing Caliban had to go to London zoo to study the apes in order to perfect his craft. (*Sycorax* 31-32)

In reality, however, the Director is too deeply mired in the prejudices of his society to challenge even the casting of the play which is still rigorously cast in race; he is still too anxious about personal and professional advancement to follow his insights to their logical conclusions. His paradoxical acknowledgement that the play is "about colonialism," his insistence that politics be excluded from the production and his refusal to acknowledge the relevance of appropriate linguistic inflections in translating Shakespeare set him on a collision course with Sugar Cane. Denied the opportunity to play Prospero for racial reasons, Sugar Cane chooses to appropriate his Caribbean patois for his role of Caliban:

Director: What was that?

Sugar Cane: (*moving away*) Wettin sweet in goat-mouth, sour in his behind.

Director: (*follows him*) And, please, stop speaking with that accent, it will piss off the patrons. I thought your drama teachers helped you get rid of that patois at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts?

Sugar Cane: (*stops*) They COULD not. And I intend to use it tonight.

Director: You dare not, Sugar Cane!

Sugar Cane: I will! Watch mi!

Director: Why?

Sugar Cane: Because, Mr Director, (*confronts him*) it is through language that we name

the world. It is also through language that we *rename* the world. (*Sycorax* 41-42)

However, Irobi's interest in the proper language of translating Shakespeare in cultural revisions of the playwright is even more crucially relevant to the role of discourse both in colonisation and decolonisation.

Said's seminal insight that has been of enormous influence in the postcolonial revaluation of the European canon has been the sustained demonstration that literature and culture despite their ostensibly nonpartisan pretensions are in reality the dominating frameworks by which the colonised is contained and represented. Orientalism and similar kindred inventions, for all their scholarly and dispassionate veneer, are ultimately "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient" (*Orientalism* 3) and other colonised peoples. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said highlights the special roles that colonial travel narratives played in the grand scheme to justify colonialism by the creation of mythologies and in the converse process of decolonisation:

[S]tories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world. They also became the method colonized people used to assert their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course, but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, and who won it back and who now, plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narratives. (xii)

Irobi's validation of Said is especially evident in his insights into the creation of colonial myths. Sycorax's documentation of her relationship with Prospero and the latter's misrepresentation of her as a witch is a variation on her tales

of Christopher Columbus's earlier treatment of her grandmother, Queen Ioana. Both tales, like Shakespeare's Prospero's claim that the island had been uninhabited at his arrival regardless of the original indigenes who had lived there for centuries, repeat well-known colonial myths appropriating historiography and cartography in an attempt to validate colonialism. Echeruo locates in the same category of myths "the modernity of such legal fictions as the *terra nullius* which the Popes had decreed could be legitimately possessed by any Christian prince or people. Had Prospero chosen to remain on the island, he would have argued, as many still do, that he had acquired the primary right to it by the very act of being marooned on it; and further that Caliban, even if he could sustain a claim to the residual right to the island through his mother, had forfeited that right by failing to exploit its gold and diamonds, and farm its vineyards" ("Shakespeare" 9).

Beyond his indication of Europe's self-conscious invention of ideological myths that seek to justify colonialism, Irobi also indicates some prevailing circumstances and conditions that may genuinely interfere with travellers' perceptions and reports. Locating the enchanted island in the Caribbean rather than in the Mediterranean, Ariel traces the typical delusions of the shipwrecked Italians to the unconscious:

All shipwrecked men and women always lose a sense of time and place. They enter a time warp; a liminal threshold where they are in a place that is no place, a time that is no time. A time of marvels. They have hallucinations. They see apparitions. They have illusions. The crack head in there [Prospero] also had the same illusions when he arrived here twelve years ago. And he has kept that comforting illusion ever since. It helps him face a terrifying reality. He keeps believing that he is in the Mediterranean Sea. That Italy is nearer than it actually is. But I can tell you sincerely that you are in the Caribbean. (*Sycorax* 118-19)

There are also sustained references to diverse forms of

intoxication inducing hallucinatory effects capable of interfering with perceptions of people and places especially when they are not familiar. Sycorax insinuates that Prospero suffered an addiction to marijuana initially used as a medicinal herb to resuscitate him on his arrival on the island. There abound too subtle inconsistencies in the drunken Italian mariners' portrait of Prospero in Italy that accentuate this fact. By empowering even the voices of the relatively minor characters and thus enabling them tell their own stories, a much more complex web of interlocking tales emerges in *Sycorax* complicating and contesting Prospero's narrative in *The Tempest*. However, Irobi hardly validates any of these voices as "history"; he demonstrates instead that a voice empowered after a considerable period of repression is often susceptible to occasional amplification and may suffer from a tendency to replicate the oppressor's voice.

Enacting a drama aimed at contesting Prospero's account of his sojourn on the enchanted island which he sold on his return to Europe to Shakespeare and which the playwright turned into a "magnificent farce called *The Tempest*" (*Sycorax* 9), Sycorax links the significance of the theatre to history:

Isn't that what the theatre always forces us to do? To remember. Remember the bliss and the blisters of our histories! Yes, friends, that is what the theatre is all about. The theatre makes us *rememory* what happened to us in the past in order to make sense of our present lives. It is the grain of pain that sets our feet aright on the footpath of history [. . .]. (*Sycorax* 21)

Sycroax, however, demonstrates that there is no grand inviolable vision that the troupe must recreate but that prevailing factors such as patronage, audience, and the director's agenda could determine the version of theatrical truth enacted. For one audience, the injunction to the troupe is: "[T]hey are from America. They will give us a lot of money if we give the story a happy ending. You like happy endings in

America, don't you?" (*Sycorax* 17). For another audience, the emphases are varied to create a particular inflection: "[T]hese people are *not* tourists. They are *not* lost souls from the Scandinavian countries or rootless trees from Australia, the USA, Canada and England who have come to the Caribbean for some sand, seaspray, sunshine and a lickle sex" (*Sycorax* 23-24). Irobi sets in relief the necessity of the creative impact of audience, actors, and directors complementing the playwright's vision. In suggesting that the Australian version of the play will have the title "Truganini" (in honour of the iconic female leader, Oceania Truganini, 1812-1876, of the Aboriginal resistance to European colonialism in Tasmania), Irobi indeed privileges local history and audience over any particular concept of the text as inviolable.⁴

Sycorax is relentless in *staging* its own theatricality.⁵ The entire play sets in relief *playing* in the making, art under construction, rather than as artifice. A substantial part of the work rehearses the process of play-making, deals with *rehearsals* of the play and metacommentary:

The cast rush out in their costumes and use strips of green tarpaulin to create a make-shift green-room. Some are still making up, others are rehearsing their lines and making gestures in the air. A few are tuning their voices and yodelling loudly. Some practice their dance movements without the music. It is a hilarious, almost farcical, scene. (Sycorax 34)

Identities shift and conflate and there are perhaps just too many Calibans, Sycoraxes, and Prosperos on stage playing so many diverse roles in different versions of *The Tempest* going on simultaneously not to task the credulity of any audience. Some of the characters occasionally abandon their roles and play themselves, contesting as rivals for roles in a production and the actors are paid on stage as individuals for their roles in the production at the end of the play. The RSC Director is mortified to find ascribed to him by his cast racist comments for which he had rebuked the wife. But he is also to assume the role of

"Shakespeare" in his second incarnation, conjured to give an account of *The Tempest* and later too assumes the burden of acting Prospero in an adaptation of the play he objects to. "Shakespeare" even plays the role of Sycorax (with Sycorax removing her gown and putting it on him on stage!) while both take the epilogue after first discussing whose role it should be—a discussion that is itself preceded by Sycorax's account of an alternative ending to the suicide bombing:

That was the first ending of our version of *The Tempest* titled *The Shipwreck*. But we *changed* it. We changed it because all the European characters had *changed*. So, why kill them as Shakespeare killed me off because he did not know what to do with me and my powers in his own play? We could have blown them to pieces but . . . we let them go. For we had understood their humanity. The angel and the beast in every one of them. As in all of us. We saw who they truly are. Human beings. We understood their need for redemption. We let them go. (*Sycorax* 140)

Sycorax also sets Ariel free. Sycorax's sexual and material exploitation of Ariel is a deliberate parody of Prospero's relationship with him. Refusing to let Ariel go, Sycorax virtually opens her mouth to let Prospero's voice come through when she says: "I will not [set Ariel free]. If I hadn't saved him from the tree where Prospero imprisoned him, he would have been dead by now, wouldn't he?" (*Sycorax* 19). Irobi certainly discerns in the shared power relation between the coloniser and ex-colonised (enshrined in the capitalist running of the tourist theatre) a legacy of colonialism, that is, a replication of the master's voice. Here, in other words, mimicry is meant as indictment. However, as Garuba, citing Bowen, has noted, the use of *The Tempest* and other canonical Western texts as sites of thinking about the Third World privileges the European presence, traps the Other within its discursive structures and imprisons narratives from other cultures in the allegorical (65). *Sycorax* contests *The Tempest*'s adequacy in a truly fiery brave

new world and indicts it for its role in the creation of that world; it ostensibly revises the ending of *The Shipwreck*, given the recognition of a shared humanity. Nonetheless, the epilogue both endorses that “rejected” ending and perpetuates the critical binaries, *we* and *they*:

[W]herever you are hiding tonight, whatever you are doing this hour, remember that we have a map of every city in the world. We have the atlas of every street, every road, every crescent and every lane. Every tenement yard, every shanty, every shack, every chattle house, every pent house. We know where you live. Your castles and skyscrapers will not save you. We have your phone numbers. We know where your children go to school. And where your wives and girlfriends go to dress their hair and do their shopping. We know when they go to market and the churches where they go to worship. We know the crowded places and the lonely places. We have the weapons of mass destruction that can turn you into ashes, into cinders, into charcoal at the touch of a button. And when the hour comes, we will strike! (*Sycorax* 143)

Irobi's early play *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* had also treated the theme of the writer's assumption of full responsibility for the implications of his work. Irobi's provenance is the iconic writer's appropriation of his considerable influence to initiate or perpetuate traditions that steadily accumulate symbolic value. For Irobi, Wole Soyinka in *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* and William Shakespeare in *Sycorax* are in that class of writers and the great irony of his subjection of both writers to rigorous censure is his recognition of their iconic status and thus enormous influence. The earlier play serves as a template for the later, as Irobi still retains whipping as part of the experience of the accused writer. Ariel's prologue to *Sycorax*, “I have come to bury Shakespeare not to praise him [. . .]” (22), in its parody of Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, easily recalls the hilarious caricature of Soyinka's rebuttal of Negritude in the earlier play. Prospero's plea in

Sycorax for the compulsions of his political experience to account for his misdemeanours—"And what do you know about my political tribulations to stand in judgement over me" (95)—clearly echoes Professor Ogun's claims in *Gold Frankincense and Myrrh* that his experience of persecution justifies his obscurantist style of writing: "What do you know about my sufferings, my anguish from my clashes with governments? [. . .]" (36).

Sycorax, however, indicates how much Irobi has grown as a playwright in the intervening three decades. While in the earlier play he struggles to find the appropriate dramatic format for his austere theme, ultimately making do with a tedious dramatic debate, in the later, his confident playing with the idea of playing is telling. In *Sycorax*, he turns the theatre into a metaphor for the shifting nature of "truth" and presents that "truth" as necessarily provisional and tenable in a particular historical context. If there is seething anger in his contestation of Shakespeare's representation of Europe's Others, and if his castigation of the West is totalising, his audacious adaptation of Shakespeare goes even beyond the search for an appropriate linguistic medium for cultural translation in his de-scription of a canonical European text in terms of the aesthetics of an oral culture. Irobi's substantial interrogation of the myth of the Bard with a privileged insight into the quintessence of a changeless mortal condition is based on the idea of a scriptless oral performance with the capability of transformation and self-renewal under prevailing circumstances. In reality, the signal insight of Irobi's "Akpankoro" theory of theatre-making is that even the "final version" of a play is continually subject to re-visioning, pending history and circumstance of performance, and that the published text is ultimately therefore no more than a *pre-text* for performance.

Chapter

6



Music, Dance, and (Political) Transformation in Irobi's Drama

Irobi's adoption of the pervasiveness and variety of music and dance in the African festival is a distinguishing feature of his drama and requires close attention for many reasons. Together with celebration itself, music and dance are the imperatives of the African festival, as their varying manifestations modulate moods and the flow of ritual and theatrical intensity. From the most amateur and free-for-all performances to the most professional and sophisticated displays, music and dance create the enchanted space for bonding the festive community with their guests, general spectators, and unseen but acknowledged supernatural presences in a convivial communal celebration of life and its mysteries. Describing the African festival as an integration of "*parados, gestus* and *melos*," M.J.C. Echeruo sets the role of music in the festival in relief:

Melos can be described simply as the language of festival, especially if we understand the festival properly as the *text-less* play. The generic term, *music*, may be used in place of melos. In this sense, music becomes the medium by which

parados (or public circumstance) and gestus (particular doings) express their meaning. It is music, both instrumental and vocal, that provides the grammatical bonding to processions and gestures. There would seem, in this case, to be added significance when speech-language and music-language, as in Africa, are both tonal and rhythm-based. Melos thus unites human and instrumental language and renders conversation, soliloquy, and dialogue, the interventions of human language in Western-text-plays, not only redundant but sometimes actually irrelevant. (140-41)

The compact between music and dance in the African festival presupposes the recurring presence of the dancer both heeding the message of the music and complementing it in the art of creation in a complex semiotic field capable of transforming the human body into a compelling spectacle, a figural embodiment of political codes, and even a possible receptacle of divine visitations.

In his 2007 interview with Leon Osu, using masquerade music that he learnt as a child for his model, Irobi emphasised both the evocative powers of music and its pattern of meaning-making to the initiate:

[W]hen you make the usual masquerade music rhythm / ke ke ke ti ke ke/ accompanied by the base drum, udu, and the ogene with their own common rhythms everybody who is an initiate knows what you are saying. The common ekwe rhythm (ke ke ke ti ke ke) means "ekpo na ekpo ezukolata ogu mma adawala [when a mask encounters another a duel ensues]. (n. pag.)

He highlights the subtle role of the music and the song as well as the culture of masquerade conflicts that they both anticipate and entrench in his formation of an ideology of rebellion. His comments on the music of the Ekpe festival draw attention to the counterhegemonic role of music, indicating its strong emotional impact on the participants and the careful variation and selection of songs to achieve a compelling climax. In his

work, Irobi strives to maximise both the political and ritualistic effects of festive music and dance.

Helen Gilbert's seminal work on the dance in contemporary Australian drama and her and Joanne Tompkins's discussion of song and music in postcolonial drama generally establish invaluable paradigms. Gilbert recognises dance as an ideologically encoded signifying practice and therefore as a site of cultural negotiation. She contends that dance is a focalising agent that "draws attention to the rhetoric of embodiment in all performance" (135). Gilbert notes further that dance spatialises, given that it "foregrounds proxemic relationships between characters, spectators and features of the set" (135). Gilbert's crucial recognition of the capacity of dance to function as a Brechtian device by foregrounding the constructedness of dramatic presentation has enormous implications for a full appreciation of the rhetoric of embodiment: "[S]ituated within a dramatic text, dance often de-naturalizes theatre's signifying practices by disrupting narrative sequence and/or genre. What dance 'does' then, is draw attention to the constructedness of dramatic representation, which suggests that it can function as an alienating device in the Brechtian sense. This calls for analysis of its ideological encoding, an especially important project in criticism of postcolonial texts" (135). Gilbert and Tompkins offer a similar insight on the intersection of song with music in drama, and note that diverting the drama from one discourse to another could affirm a point of view or offer an alternative perspective. Their indication of the potential use of song for communal affirmative action illuminates Irobi's practice: "[I]f post-colonial theatre provides an occasion for a vocal expression of solidarity, resistance, or even presence, song can intensify the reactions of both the actors and the audience. Its effects can be multiplied by the numerous voices of a chorus, reinforcing communal action/interaction by increasing both vocal numbers and volume" (194).

Disillusioned by the cynical exploitation of the Nigerian masses, the corruption of their self-centred leaders, and moreover their will to self-perpetuation in power, Irobi's basic concern as a playwright is the failures of the postcolonial Nigerian state. His temper demonstrably Fanonian, he aims at a popular uprising, a revolution in which the barely educated pauperised masses and the socially disinherited unemployed youths form the core of the revolutionary vanguard. His appeal therefore is typically through the media of popular lore and music shared between actors and audience. Irobi's 1989 interview with Nengi Ilagha in which he had stressed unemployment as a latent revolutionary factor underscores his own recognition of that segment of society as potential revolutionaries. Popular songs and traditional chants are invaluable in Irobi's rhetorical appeals to this class of people. He hardly needs to compose new songs; instead, by generating the appropriate mood or by the insertion of an apt new phrase, a popular or ancient folk song is charged with political inflection or has a latent ideological message brought to the fore.

Intimations of Irobi's dexterous appropriation and deployment of music and dance as encoded texts are manifest even in his earliest plays, as demonstrated in his use of an elegiac-propitiatory chant in *The Colour of Rusting Gold* and a mock-victory song in *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh*. In the former, he aims at deepening a mood of tragic pathos and in the latter at completing a sustained parodic ritualistic canonisation. In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi's use of music and dance is even more detailed and more complex. The contrast between the leisurely coronation dance of pride and dignity and the frightful war song of the Suicide Squad that interrupts it is ideological. And after their condemnation, Yekini, who chooses to resign rather than hang the members of the Suicide Squad, ascribes to their song emotive effects beyond mere words: "As they sang, their voices swept across the face of the

mind like sea breeze on a cold night when the moon decides to peep into the soul of the ocean, and becomes a lantern for the lonely fisherman" (*Hangmen* 11). Even the prison doctor confesses in spite of himself: "I felt as if spiders were crawling across my spine towards the neck" (11).¹ It was, however, in *Nwokedi* that Irobi, in consciously adopting the dance-drama structure of a traditional festival, fully realises the performative and ideological potentials of music and dance for the first time in his drama.

In his identification of the Ekpe, on which Irobi models *Nwokedi*, as a dance-drama, J. N. Amankulor is painstaking in evoking the enchanting atmosphere of conviviality and communal celebration:

On *Ekpe* day, many choric groups perform, ranging from groups of elderly men or women to children's groups. But the most important of all these groups is the group comprising men drawn from different quarters of the village who accompany the masquerade dancer and chief actor. Before noon on *Ekpe* day, this group rouses the village and begins the series of a circular movement designed to take them to the village square and out of it. It is led by a choric leader who in the Greek sense is the *epheboi*. The *epheboi* sings in praise of the village ancestors, especially those of them who had been chief actors, soliciting their blessings for the current chief actor and the village. (118)

Amankulor also refers to other choric groups of young men, women, and children whose presence makes the Ekpe a truly communal festival. He compares the three dance movements that he identifies as the vectors of plot advancement to the ancient Greek model: "In movement, *Ekpe* follows closely the three ritualistic movements of the Greek chorus. The entry movement of *Ekpe* could be regarded as the Greek prologos, the sacrificial movement, its stasimon and the exit movement, the Greek exodus" (127). Indeed, Irobi retains both the three-part structure of the Ekpe festival and its form as dance-drama

in *Nwokedi*.

The First Cycle of *Nwokedi* begins with villagers chanting “with festive verve and passion” (1); at the outset of the Second, “A parade is going on at a nearby field. From there, a song bursts above the thunder of martial music” (23); and the initial stage direction at the beginning of the Third Cycle is: “Festive music in the distance” (51). Singing and dancing go on throughout the entire drama in their colourful and multiple varieties—traditional chants and drumming, martial music, buccaneers’ boisterous songs, the light satirical pieces of corps members—only occasionally receding to the background before rising once more to the fore. In Irobi’s drama, as in festival performances, music is at the centre of communal participation.

The songs constitute a pivotal part of Irobi’s dramaturgy in *Nwokedi* as amply testified to both by the sheer number of Igbo folk songs he uses in the play and his painstaking translation of the songs, unlike in his other plays. Moreover, the crucial ideological role that Irobi assigns to the songs is highlighted in the note he writes to the translations:

Except for the dirges, all the songs used in this play employ a vigorous “call and response” technique which allows the soloist and his chorus to incorporate, through verbal satire, topical events, especially on our contemporary epileptic political situation into the thread of the drama as it unfolds in the theatre. The English translations offered are detergent versions of these extremely mythical songs. The translations do not in any way render the full meaning, or the contrapuntal lyrical power of these songs, so evocative in performance. As for the poetry, Robert Frost was right: Poetry is what is lost in translation. (94)

Irobi’s aim is to galvanise the audience into a vigorous participation in a manner reminiscent of a traditional African performance. Thoroughly knowledgeable of the songs, Irobi’s audiences typically accept the invitation to express solidarity with the playwright and the actors on stage by participating in

singing the rousing choruses of the folk songs he subtly deploys for ideological purposes in his drama. This bonding consummated at the moment of the rendition of popular folk songs is crucial in the process of conscientisation.

Dramaturgically, Irobi's use of ideologically contrasting songs and dance styles at the outset of *Nwokedi* in lieu of a prologue is innovative. Faithful to the structure of the traditional Ekpe festival, *Nwokedi* begins with a procession of villagers chanting:

Solo: Ugbo elema anyi yeee
 Chorus: Ugbo ugbo agalagala ugbo
 Solo: Ugbo elema anyi wooo
 Chorus: Ugbo ugbo eeee, ugbo
 Solo: Ekpe anyi bu ekpe nganga
 Chorus: Ugbo ugbo eeee ugbo
 Solo: Onye iwe na-ewe agbaghitaghi ya
 Chorus: Ugbo, ugbo eeee ugbo
 Solo: Okata furu ekpe chuwa nne ya oso
 Chorus: Ugbo, ugbo eee ugbo
 Solo: Obu onye odo l'o ga-nigbu ya egbu
 Chorus: Eeee, ugbo eeee ugbo. (94)

The song is celebratory, the procession is dignified; the mood is one of mirth and pride. If Irobi, rather surprisingly, describes them as "a violence of villagers" and uses the word "spill" for their entrance onto the stage, their song exalts serenity, condemns fury, and vilifies the murderous frenzy associated with the possessed mask dancer in the reference to the masked Okata who pursued the mother with obvious murderous intent. Irobi's translation, typically aimed at evoking the sense of the Igbo folk chant rather than an unperceptive literal transliteration, is insightful, except that his frequent inclination to create variants for repeated lines occasionally denies the song the incantatory intensity that repetitions more easily evoke:

Solo: Our procession is arriving
Chorus: Our great processing is arriving
Solo: Our procession is approaching
Chorus: Our great procession is approaching
Solo: Our festival is a noble festival
Chorus: Our procession is still coming
Solo: He who has anger in his heart cannot join
Chorus: Our procession is coming on
Solo: Okata who donned the Ekpe mask and
pursued his mother
Chorus: Our procession is swinging on
Solo: Were it someone else, wouldn't he have
murdered him?
Chorus: Our procession is swinging on. (94)

Irobi next introduces a song from the second movement of the Ekpe, the climactic moment of the ancient sacrifice (that is, in emotional terms, from the Third Cycle of *Nwokedi*): *"The chant hots up and, Ukadike, armed with a white cock, trots in changing both the pace and the song. 'Ari ko nko ugu' sizzles through the air. At its crescendo, an incensed Obidike cuts the cock's throat spilling its blood into the earthenware pot carried by one of the acolytes"* (1). The soloist in the Igbo song charts the stages of his rapturous submission to the overpowering invasion of his being by a force he says is greater than the human ("Ihe ka mmadu") and is also greater than warfare ("Ihe ka ugu"). He screams repeatedly that this force is invading his being ("Obatala m n'ahu o") and pleads to be saved from murder by being relieved of the machet he holds. However, at the end of the song his resistance is over and his submission complete. Irobi's translation clearly indicates that his reading of the song is in terms of the power of the spirit of possession:

Solo: A trial greater than war has come
Chorus: The trial is here [. . .]
Solo: I am getting possessed.

Chorus: Something greater than war is here.

Solo: I say the spirit has entered into me.

Chorus: The great trial is here.

Solo: Honestly, I must slaughter a man.

Chorus: The trial is here.

Solo: Won't you seize this matchet trembling in my hand?

Chorus: The great ritual is here.

Solo: I am possessed, God knows, I am possessed. (*Nwokedi* 96)

Thus, the first dance, royal in carriage and joyous in mood, is replaced by a more vigorous and violent one heralding the radical action that initiates a rebirth. The sacrifice of the cock only foreshadows the decapitation episode later in the play. In political terms, the trajectory is from the celebration of the status quo to a revolution, and in artistic terms, a thoughtful conceptualisation of the song and dance.

In his 2007 interview, Irobi likens the role of the chief actor in the Ekpe just before the moment of the decapitation of the goat to Achebe's Ezeulu in the Pumpkin festival in *Arrow of God*, obviously to suggest that the physical encounter is emblematic of a deep spiritual and metaphysical crisis involving an entire community. Songs that celebrate masculine valour and heroism, extolling the ruthlessness of war, proliferate in the climactic movement of *Nwokedi*. *Nwokedi* is exalted in one song as the one "Who swallows Kernel with blood . . . // who makes sacrifice with blood . . . // Who sees battle and plunges his head . . . // Whose penis is a sharp sword" (99). In another song, the jungle typically produces the emblematic king of the hunt whose ferocity the Ekumeku ecstatically claims to incarnate: "We are the tiger's cubs // When the tiger goes a hunting // The gazelle is frightened into flight" (103). And while in the entry song, Otaka was the object of communal censure, as the moment of sacrifice approaches, the spillage of blood becomes the badge of virtue in the song "Eji m obara

akwo aka," in which blood is trivialised, indistinguishable in use from water and palm oil.

Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds cite Mark Franko to note that the self is a historical construct and is therefore historically bounded (55); cite Hanna Järvinen to contend that bodies and bodily experiences are historically specific, not universally alike (55); and cite Alan Berthoz to argue the cultural specificity of the perception of movement (72). They therefore interrogate the universalism at the heart of John Martin's account of the audience's vicarious participation in the performance of dance through the mechanism of "inner mimicry":

We shall cease to be mere spectators and become participants in the movement that is presented to us, and though to all outward appearances we shall be sitting quietly in our chairs, we shall nonetheless be dancing synthetically with all our musculature. Naturally these motor responses are registered by our movement-sense receptors, and awaken appropriate emotional associations akin to those which have animated the dancer in the first place. It is the dancer's whole function to lead us into imitating his actions with our faculty for inner mimicry in order that we may experience his feelings. (qtd. in Reason and Reynolds 54)

In the African context, moreover, the compact between music and language and between music and dance creates a medley of interrelated signifying discourses—of which the dancer is only one—providing access to the portals of meaning and pleasure. Nzewi has noted that text in African music would include "a vocal processing of language," which he designates as "song," "instrumental processing of language," which he calls "metasong," "the choreographic processing of language," that is, "the visual poetry of dance as metaphor" and "symbolic documentation of cultural statements" or "the extramusical meaning of special music instruments and musical arts costumes" (91). Dance in a drama text is similarly situated in

a complex of composite signifying forms. In Irobi's drama, the song texts are complemented by annotative dramatic dialogue embedded in music that we can refer to as *dramatic song texts*. Nwokedi's final dialogue with his father and Arikpo shortly before the moment of their murder is particularly illustrative of this mode.

The fierce verbal fencing between father and son steady threatens to degenerate into a mortal combat and drum beats both measure and accentuate the ideological gulf between the two. Set in the context of the pervading music, their words are foregrounded as the text of the song:

[The song now surrounds the house and father and son are engulfed by it. They dance, immersed in its festive ecstasy.]

Nwokedi Snr: (*smiling*) Nwokedi, when Time was young and handsome, I was called the Matador. I was called the Matador because I saw life as a bull and faced it bare-handed. (*dances*) I was called the Matador not because I killed the bull, but because I stayed alive to entertain the crowd. Yes, Nwokedi, my son. The true matador never kills the bull. He merely steps aside from the angry paths of the charging bull.

Nwokedi: (*dancing*) Father, I am not the true matador. I am Nwokedi. That is why I will not step aside from the path of the charging bull. No. I will not. I will rather stand in his path and with my matchet, cut off his head. Yes, father, this evening I will behead the bull. (*dances on*) (82)

The disparity in ideology is finally expressed in terms of the disparity in dance steps as the dance assumes its most ominous dimension:

Nwokedi: (*dancing*) Father, we shall dance again.

Nwokedi Snr: (*dancing*) Yes, son. We shall dance again.

Nwokedi: At the festival . . .

Nwokedi Snr: (*still dancing*) Yes, at the festival.
(*pause*) But we shall dance in a wider circle.

Nwokedi: And it will be a wilder dance [. . .]
Arikpo, we shall dance again.

Arikpo: (*pause*) Nwokedi, haven't we danced enough to know each other's dance steps? (85)

Nwokedi's next contact with them is at the moment of their decapitation.

Nwokedi Snr's defence of the failures of his generation of politicians evokes the ideological and cultural conflict characteristic of the postcolonial heritage: "We are bats. Twilight creatures stillborn in a twilight zone. Torn between two angry civilizations. Blinking from the dust of the clash of their hooves. Political hybrids, we are a confused generation" (77). He identifies as the greatest achievement of his generation the creation of an imperfect system to which one, however, had to conform to survive. Thus, a mastery of the system and the will to personal survival, not an inclination to reform the system, typify his attitude: "[N]ow I understand this system like the back of my hand. I understand it like my skin. I know its veins and arteries. I have wriggled in it like a virus and survived" (78). Irobi explores this theme in terms of symbolic cultural suicide, that is, the abandonment of positive indigenous communal ethos.

In rejecting Arikpo's offer of personal salvation, Nwokedi acts out the Ekpe drums' injunctions to communal redemption.

But as Nwokedi's response to the drums approaches possession, Nwokedi Snr attempts to lure him to another music (whose source is Arikpo's radio set):

Nwokedi Snr: Nwokedi, (*pause, Nwokedi turns*)
 Forget those drums. Forget those
 songs. And listen to this other music.
 Nwokedi: What miserable music is that?
 Nwokedi Snr: Martial music. (81)

The elder Nwokedi's enunciation of the virtues of the dance *dictated* by martial music is metonymic of an exaltation of the mindset of the human herd in which the individual is submerged in the undifferentiated and contained mass. Involving synchronised swinging of the arms and stylised movements of the legs, a military match-past technically approaches a dance. But given the inflexibility of even the swinging limbs, the virtual compulsion towards mere reflexive group action and considering also that it is, moreover, an exercise intended to inculcate the discipline of obeisance to authority, the march-past is ultimately a parody of the dance, a ritual glorification of the regimental life embodied by the military institution. Nwokedi Snr enjoins the son:

Now, imagine you are the commander of an army. And on a national independence celebration day, your army is marching across the podium where the Head of State stands, rigid like a pyramid, taking the salute. Imagine that out of the one thousand soldiers, nine hundred and ninety-nine are marching wrongly: (*demonstrates*) Right, left—Right, left—Right, left. There is only one soldier marching correctly: Left, Right—Left, Right—Left, Right. Commander, what would you do? Would you tell nine hundred and ninety-nine soldiers to change their steps and march correctly or would you order the only soldier marching correctly to change and march Right, Left—Right, left? What would you do? And remember, the crowd is watching. The television men are there. And

worst of all, the Head of State. (*demonstrates, hand-in-salute*)
Rigid like a pyramid! [*The martial music simmers on*]. (81)

The conformity demanded for survival by Nwokedi Snr's generation of politicians culminates in the will of authoritarian military regimes for absolute homogenisation. The South African novelist, André Brink, who achieved eminence as an internationally respected commentator on the apartheid establishment, has noted that power is "narcissist by nature, striving constantly to perpetuate itself through cloning, approaching more and more a state of homogeneity by casting out whatever seems foreign or deviant, until all parts become interchangeable and reflect perfectly the whole" (173). Irobi's indictment of the Nigerian leadership is a condemnation of politicians and soldiers alike. Nwokedi dismisses his father's generation of politicians, of whom Arikpo is a representative figure, as "jackals, vandals, Cannibals, Carnivores, Scavengers. Culture Vultures!" (77). Arikpo's condemnation of the soldiers who oust that class of politicians extends the list of invectives: "Hyenas! Vandals! Jackals! Animals! Cannibals! Carnivores! Kosokos! Wolves [. . .] Rogues! Civet cats! The spotted scavengers of the Sahel! Vermins! (sic) Vulgarities! Obscenities! Uniformed rams!" (90). Bound by compulsive predatory instincts and virtually indistinguishable no matter their affiliations, Nigerian leaders through terror and a deliberate process of pauperising the citizenry seek to reduce them to a powerless and pliable sop. Nwokedi Snr's anecdote of a military parade, exalting neither excellence nor credibility but conformity, illustrates this for Irobi. The related tropes of music and dance are clearly central in Irobi's schema for foregrounding his themes and giving them symbolic consequence in *Nwokedi*.

Irobi identified at the core of the indigenous African initiatory and mythopoeic acting style he profoundly admired in Soyinka's work a deep absorption in a theatrical role. Thus, initiatory rites with their drumming and dancing and the

experience of spirit possession provide him with a distinctive model for the theatre. Irobi's drama demonstrates his close study of *Death and the King's Horseman* in this regard. The rhetorical stance of meditating on drumbeats from the fringe of a trance, and using them as a cue to reveal and comment on the significance of a rite that Nwokedi admires is undoubtedly a legacy Irobi inherited from his experience of performing the role of Elesin. For instance, as Elesin approaches the moment of sacrifice, Soyinka writes:

(They listen to the drums). They have begun to seek out the heart of the King's horse. Soon it will ride in its bolt of raffia with the dog at its feet. Together they will ride on the shoulders of the King's grooms through the pulse centres of the town. They know it is here I shall await them. (His eyes appear to cloud. He passes his hand over them as if to clear his sight. He gives a faint smile). (*Death* 40-41)

At the corresponding moment of Nwokedi's own experience, Irobi offers the stage direction, followed by a sentence that structurally recalls Soyinka's:

[The drums are almost at the door steps. Nwokedi drapes the wrappers around his shoulder and with his machet in his right hand begins to dance, intoning [. . .]

They have brought out the mask from the rafters of the shrine. The priest has shorn it of root and dirt (*displays it*) I have brought out the ancient machet. It has shaken hands with the whetting stone. The earth is panting like a tired dog. The world is waiting for a new life. The land awaits its spill of blood [. . .] *[The drums are louder. His dance more violent [. . .]. (75)*

Donald Morales is justified in his discernment in the intended final moments of Elesin's movement of transition the climax of Soyinka's use of music and dance as a catalyst for the ritual transformation: "Elesin's absorption through the incantation of music, dance, and poetry is complete as he slows

without losing any elasticity of movement. The rhythmic gbedu drumming and women's dirge gradually subsume language as Elesin's dance movements become unconscious. It is a model of the pervasive and organic force of music in a dramatic performance" (149). Ordinarily a poet, entranced by the enchantment of words, Elesin is speechless before the overpowering force of the numinous. Described as "a man of enormous vitality" at the outset of his approach to the market place, his steps now become ponderous titanic acts of the will. Music alone evokes the intensity of these climactic moments and accentuates the ritual intensity of Elesin's trance-dance. Christopher Balme has remarked on the centrality of the equestrian metaphor in Elesin's final, long pre-trance-dance speech and underscores its relevance to his imminent possession: "Not only is he the king's horseman, but the notions of horsemanship, riding, and being 'mounted' by a spirit are integral to Yoruba spirit possession. Expressions such as 'make my limbs strike earth like a thoroughbred' or the stallion will ride in triumph on the back of man' abound and not only refer to the notion of the possessed person being 'ridden' by the spirit, but also reflect aesthetic principles [. . .]. Soyinka's exact description of Elesin's movement reflect (sic) culturally defined aesthetic principles" (217). Praise Singer's projections into Elesin's mind are audacious flights of the imagination appropriately expressed primarily in proverbs and rhetorical questions:

Elesin Alafin, don't think I do not know why your lips are heavy, why your limbs are drowsy as palm oil in the cold of harmattan. I would call you back but when the elephant heads for the jungle, the tail is too small a handhold for the hunter that would pull him back. The sun that heads for the sea no longer heeds the prayers of the farmer. When the river begins to taste the salt of the ocean, we no longer know what deity to call on, the river-god or Olokun. No arrow flies back to the string, the child does not return through the same passage that gave it birth. (*Death* 44)

Irobi attempts a recreation of this moment of intense musical and poetic enchantment even when his engagement with the moment of transition privileges its political rather than its metaphysical significance. Nwokedi is not a moral pilgrim burdened by communal guilt that self-sacrifice alone can expiate. He thus confronts no grim visions of death that render him speechless, necessitating another character assuming his voice. On the eve of the transition ritual, the space that Nwokedi's imagination fills is the physical distance between Northern Nigeria where he is a corps member and the East where his traditional role is imminent. But in Nwokedi's response to the promptings of the drum, Elesin's drums reverberate in Irobi's memory as do Elesin's articulations of a haunting apocalyptic vision; and Soyinka's formulations guide him:

(A burst of drumming and singing rises faintly in the distance)

Nwokedi: *(staring)* They are singing the old year away. My village is singing the barren year away. They are dirging for this desecrated earth. *(he peers into the distance, his feet moving with his eyes.)* I can see the procession of men, women and children thronging from house to house, throwing ashes into the streets while gusts of dust burst under the thunder of their stomping feet. *(The drumming and singing swells hugely)* And now they besiege our house. They lay a siege at the threshold, asking the empty rooms why, on the eve of the festival, the flesh of an ancient spirit is still flitting like a ghost in a distant land. I can see my mother, cowering under the shower of their questions. I can see her stuttering

out her frightened answers to a desperate crowd. (*The singing and drumming begins to ebb*) O, they leave. Like a nervous army. How they leave, their heads bowed in doubt, wondering what disaster would befall the land if the spirit fails to arrive before the sun is ripe. (*Nwokedi* 38)

Soyinka's insights into the relevance of masks, sacred vestments, or costumes and such paraphernalia for the achievement of the state of possession in *Death and the King's Horseman* equally provide Irobi with a viable model. Soyinka dramatises fully the Muslim Amusa's horror on seeing the District Officer, Pilkings, and his wife, Jane, dancing in the egugun attire that Pilkings had confiscated during a recent riot. Refusing to be hectored into reporting Elesin's imminent self-sacrifice that led him to the District Officer's house, Amusa explains: "[I]t is a matter of death. How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? Is like talking against government to person in uniform of police" (*Death* 25). In the wake of the death of both Elesin and his son, Olunde, Iyaloja indicts Pilkings: "[I]t is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you" (76). Soyinka's obvious suggestion is Pilkings's unwitting initiation into the cult of death by his putting on the egugun attire and, moreover, dancing in it. This pattern of transformation is also at the core of *The Road*, foregrounded in Samson's horrified recognition of the implication of his acting as Sgt Burma in the dead man's own clothes. It is even, more fundamentally, the substance of the conception of Murano as a character in the play. Irobi's practice reveals that he considers this pattern of transformation to be instructive.

In the next two plays that he published after *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of the Mask* and *The Fronded Circle*, Irobi's interest in music deepens and remains integral in his basic thematic

concerns. The protagonist of *The Fronded Circle* Afonne is indeed an Igbo with a doctoral degree in European musicology and an ethnographic interest in Igbo ritual dance, while the protagonist of *The Other Side of the Mask* Jamike a priest of Amadioha, adept at ritual music and incantations, has a certain obsession with Mozart's Symphony No. 41 (probably given the sobriquet of "Jupiter" by the London impresario John Cramer, due, as Grove suggests, to its calm, lofty, and god-like beauty (27). But in his disposition as an artist and taste for music, Jamike is modelled on insights from *Nwokedi*.

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi's artist-character, the painter Habiba, taught to paint by pain and inheriting the talent of her father, discerns in the sea, which she paints obsessively, an archetypal emblem of human life: "The sea is made of water. Water is primal to man. The sea in all its moods reflects the Life of man. One moment it is calm, serene, blue and peaceful. And the other? Violent, furious, murderous, savage and foaming at the corners of his mouth" (*Nwokedi* 35).² Observing that the white waves she paints wash the red shore like a tiger's tongue lapping a zebra's blood, she points to a possible deep psychological turmoil in her acknowledgment that her work is macabre, because in reality she paints the terrains of her mind, which are, however, indistinguishable from the terrains of the land. It is Irobi's contention that while art constructs its social context, or at any rate aspires to do so, both the artist and the work of art are equally marked by that context. Widowed only nine months into her marriage, Habiba admires in *Nwokedi* virtues he shares with her husband who had been executed for his role in a failed coup d'état. Habiba meditates on the resurgence of the feeling of love in terms of music and cultivates the serenity she needs to paint by listening to Handel's *Water Music*. She exalts and associates classical music with the artist's need for inspiration: "[Classical music] is the finest type of music. The purest. The music of the masters. It inspires. It uplifts the spirit. As an artist, it helps me interpret (sic) life.

And remember if you don't interpret (sic) life, life will interpret (sic) you [. . .]. Classical music fuels my painting" (*Nwokedi* 34). In many respects, Jamike is the magnificent culmination of the insights Irobi merely broached in his conception of the character, Habiba.

The image for which Habiba's painting is described as "macabre" recurs in Jamike's work. His piece of sculpture *The Leader* is "the clay mould of a hyena in full military uniform. Its broad tongue is red with blood" (71); and if a side of his international award-winning piece is "a fragile work in metal and ceramic [. . .] a huge skull made of ceramic and supported with an 'abstract' of metal stems" (73), when exposed, the part of the skull covered with a sliding bronze bowl reveals the brain as "*a plate of rice. Its stew is a mess of blood*" (*Other Side* 73). Jamike considers that his role as an artist is to confront a decadent world with compelling images of itself. His phrasing of his need for classical music also recalls Habiba: "I draw my inspiration from the masters, the great masters. I find the ecstasy that I need in this liquid testament of fluid souls. Spirits who soared beyond the boundary of death. Minds who transcended both time and age [. . .]. Mozart is a master" (*Other Side* 87). He indicates the impact of the Jupiter Symphony on him but does not *account* for the impact of that specific music on him and his obsession with it: "When that music caresses my soul, I have visions of things that have never existed. Music draws back the veil across new delights. It opens new worlds for me. Universe: portals! Thresholds! Doors open beyond which I catch a glimpse of the infinite" (87). Yet the Jupiter Symphony becomes emblematic of Jamike's presence, repeatedly played in the course of the drama to awaken his impulse to create or evoke his characteristic mood.

Pivotal in the scheme of Irobi's revelation of the artistic temperament in *The Other Side of the Mask* is the considerable collection of narratives about the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of renowned artists, the circumstances of their

work, and sundry fascinating tittle-tattle, both factual and apocryphal: "Michelangelo wore the same clothes for three weeks when he was painting 'the Last Judgement' on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel in Rome" (*Other Side* 11); "Franz Kafka lived a dead life. He lived a frozen life. He was schizoid. And suffered from perpetual ennui and timidity" (*Other Side* 42); and Van Gogh "cut off his ear, his right ear and sent it in a registered letter to a prostitute in the town's brothel" (*Other Side* 90). The compelling narrative of the circumstances of the composition of the Jupiter Symphony may well have transformed it for Irobi and his surrogate into a compelling symbol of the triumphant artistic spirit. Broke, in debt, and haunted by angry creditors, Mozart had been forced to move on 17 June 1788 from an apartment he had taken up only seven months earlier to a smaller one further from the city centre to save costs. Suffering public humiliation from diminishing interest in his work, he was equally afflicted with personal misfortune in the death of his only daughter on 29 June 1788. Recalling that Mozart wrote his last and greatest three symphonies—39, 40, and 41—during a six-week period in the summer of 1788 in the midst of these adversities, Ron Drummond wonders if the dominant bright, celebratory, and Olympian tone of the Jupiter Symphony is "Mozart's meditation on maintaining one's inner equanimity through troubling times" (7). Similarly, George Grove considers a subject matter of the work "gay as gay can be, just as if intrigues and cabals, and debt and illness and disappointment—poor Mozart's daily bread—had no existence" (28).

Thus, the peculiar resilience and triumph of the human spirit represented in the Jupiter Symphony justifiably makes it a potent symbol especially for a beleaguered artist desperate to rise above the myriad existential challenges of life and become an acclaimed master. *The Other Side of the Mask* does not record the circumstances of the creation of the Jupiter Symphony, but those circumstances constitute the eternal paradigm of

Jamike's anguished concept of transcendence: "I am only a man, as diminutive as dust. I am only an artist and the miseries of ordinary life depress me. I am only a sculptor. A carver! I carve because I must transcend life. Transcend the status of man. Then and only then can I be a master!" (*Other Side* 87-88). Moreover, Jupiter has other resonance in Irobi's work.

At the outset of *The Other Side of the Mask*, the wraith-like character identified as his Muse, Ziphora, explains that at the peak of his powers, Jamike flourishes in silence or music. At the end, having committed murder, he dreads silence because, as Ziphora again explains, silence is a mirror in which he dreads to confront his face. Music then becomes his only refuge:

Njemanze: What symphony is that?

Jamike: The Jupiter symphony.

Njemanze: Jupiter? Jupiter who devoured his children? (*angrily*) Fade it out! I said fade it out! Fade out the music! (*the music simmers faintly*) (*stands*) Fade that music out Totally! (*The Symphony fades*).

Njemanze: Now let us listen to silence.

Jamike: (*tortured*) Why, Prof. Why?

Njemanze: The Truth is hatched in silence.

Jamike: (*erratically*) Then I must fill the silence with some other music. The music of the chisel on wood. Let that music play! (*He begins to chisel feverishly at the statue*) [. . .]. And now I must have my music. I must have it. Give me music! Give me my Mozart! (*Bares the chisel*) Where is my Mozart! (*Other Side* 86-87)

Jamike is Irobi's most compelling embodiment of the contradictions that often typify the contemporary African

intellectual. Igbo and inheriting the carving skills that run in his family, his education in fine arts is Western; aspiring to the ranks of European master artists, he recognises the artist's virtual apotheosis in a culture in which the visionary artist is god-making; obsessed with Mozart, it is to the religious music that he himself makes that he ascribes the power of tangible transformative action. In Jamike, Irobi indicates how these diverse, even contradictory, promptings wear thin the strands of sanity.

Jupiter is the Olympian incarnation of the thunder-throwing god Amadioha, whom Jamike worships. Not the supreme deity in the Igbo pantheon, Amadioha with his famed attributes of spectacular divine epiphanies and fabulous power in a culture that celebrates masculine prowess was bound to attract absolute adulation. Amadioha's thunderbolts epitomise the conceivable limit of physical prowess: *Echewe ihe dike puru ime, echeta egbeluigwe Amadioha* (To think of what a great man can accomplish is to think of Amadioha's thunder bolts). The association of Amadioha with power is subtly manifest in the Igbo conception of iron as *igwe*, which in reality is only differentiated in tone from *igwe*, the firmament, Amadioha's fabled dwelling place. The mythical association of the deity with an axe, emblematic of strength and therefore called "*onyike*," (the powerful one), makes the picture clearer. Emeka George Ekwuru recently recorded a little-known myth of cosmic hierogamy in which the Igbo symbol of authority, Ofo, is placed in the hands of Amadioha with transformative consequences and in which, moreover, the mythical association with power and iron is symbolised by the axe:

In the beginning, *Amadioha* was living together with his wife *Ala* [the Earth goddess]. *Ala* was a very beautiful woman that had never been seen in the whole world right from the beginning of time. *Amadioha* was tall and powerful and was regarded as the king of the whole Igboland. But when *Ala* bore many children to *Amadioha* there was no food as

the land was not fertile, and nothing was growing out from the land. *Amadioha* took his *Ofo* and struck it on the ground and his wife died. After the burial of *Ala*, the Land became fertile and trees and vegetable fruits grew from it. *Amadioha* was not happy that his wife had died and in annoyance he unknowingly struck his *Ofo* on the ground again and the whole waters of the land dried up; economic trees and vegetable fruits were all affected. There was no rain and people and children of *Amadioha* began to die of thirst. *Amadioha* finally took his *Ofo* and struck it on his head, and disappeared from the ground. There was thunder and lightning for many days and consequently rain started to fall. The land was once again fertilized [. . .]. Henceforth, *Amadioha* lived in the sky as the father of the heavenly bodies, and *Ala* became the mother of all living creatures on earth [. . .]. *Amadioha* watches with his eyes and strikes all evil doers. He appears sometimes like a great ram, holding an axe in his hand for the maintenance of justice among men. (107)

Thus, antecedents in Irobi's Igbo culture warranted his deep admiration of Soyinka's portrait of Ogun. Jamike's chisel is pure metalcraft and endowed with the paradoxical potentialities of creation and destruction. In the mythical inscrutability of *Amadioha*'s ruthless justice, Irobi found correspondences with Ogun's legendary carnage at Ire and Jupiter's devouring of his children.³ Dying by his own chisel, Jamike claims to be a victim of his own god. The arrival in this scene of Kayine, Njemanze's daughter, bringing a little too late the emblematic laurel for which Jamike could have pawned his soul, makes it one of the most moving in contemporary drama. The episode is thus saturated with the paradoxical sense of loss and greatness that is central in tragedy:

Njemanze: Jamike . . .

Jamike: (*a groan*) Give me my chisel. (*gives it to him*) If you see my children . . . And my brother . . . If you see my father, tell

him if Amadioha hadn't murdered me
 . . . if I had lived . . . I would have
 conquered the world. With this chisel
 [. . .]

(Njemanze lifts Jamike's hand. It is limp. The chisel drops)

Njemanze: There is no need, Kayine.

Kayine: Why?

Njemanze: The chisel's hand is broken.

Kayine: *(picks up the chisel)* Broken?

Njemanze: *(drops the lifeless hand)* And the hand .
 . . the hand . . . is . . . *(he is overcome)*

*(Lightning and thunder crackle, engulfing their grief . .
 . The Jupiter Symphony swells to a deafening pitch).
 (Other Side 98)*

Earlier in the same episode, Jamike demonstrated the power of Amadioha to the sceptical Njemanze by eliciting lightning and thunder through the adroit use of music and ritual.

Irobi's fascination with drum language, masking, and the state of possession that they induce is consistent with his abiding interest in the idiom of religious ritual. Andrew Horn contends that a fundamental disparity between ritual and drama lies in the conception and status of the "actor" in both performances: "In ritual the actor is seen either as a representative (a priest) or as another being entirely (a spirit) [. . .]. As a medium, he is presumed to become another entity, to cease entirely being himself. Whatever the degree of his dissociation, whatever the depth or duration of his trance, he is perceived by the audience, if not always by himself, as the spirit incarnate" (96-97). Irobi's protagonists attain the state of possession through drumming, dancing, and masking. In *Nwokedi*, by focalising the prime agents of revolution, the Ekumeku, the dance (increasingly vigorous, quick-paced, and

defiant, often miming decapitating tyrants) embodies and complements the verbal discourse as a site of political intervention. As the moment of sacrifice draws near and the drums rend the air, Nwokedi, gradually entranced, becomes even more confrontational towards his father. The stage direction and the dialogue that follows immediately after account for his transformation in terms of the influence of the drums:

[They face each other, poised in fear and murderous anger. The drums are progressively louder and thunderous. Nwokedi is in the throes of a trance, possession.]

Arikpo: What is wrong with him?

Nwokedi: It is the drums. They get into the head. In my youth, I used to do what he will do this evening on behalf of the entire village.
(*Nwokedi* 79)

In *The Other Side of the Mask*, the suggestion of the difference between the identities of the protagonist and the masker is even more dramatically realised. Jamike masked and Jamike unmasked are different beings: the former mentioned Njemanze's name before Amadioha in his petition for justice, while the latter did not:

Jamike: (*as he puts off the mask*) Prof., I never mentioned your name. I was only joking.

Njemanze: Thank you.

Jamike: (*as he puts on the mask*) Prof., I did. I mentioned your name and the god heard your name.

Njemanze: Jamike, why. Why?

Jamike: (*he removes the mask, smiles*) Anyway, I did not.

Njemanze: Thank you.

Jamike: (*the mask in front of him*) Prof., to be candid, I cannot remember if I mentioned your name or not. You know I was possessed. And under possession, grievances borne in the mind often leap out of the subconscious like tadpoles in a boiling pond. (*Other Side* 80-81)

As a component of the transformative process in ritual, the mask conceals the face of the wearer to highlight the inscrutable identity of the deity or spirit he represents. Irobi suggests further by Jamike's demonstration that the state of possession is discontinuous with rational consciousness and dredges the subconscious for sedimentary but core human truths that are translatable as spiritual forces.

Irobi's staging of Jamike's transformations in his role as priest in the festival sets in even greater relief the distinctive status of the ritual actant as well as the distinction between ritual and normal notions of time and space. At the approach of the festival, Jamike, the exemplary dissatisfied artist who is anxious for appreciation, undergoes a metamorphosis. He hears distant chants beyond the perception of ordinary humans like Njemanze there with him and so prepares for the ancient ritual by a transformation into the image of time, turning his hair grey with yellow powder and putting on an old torn dress. He likewise enunciates a concept of time that belies his own age. Thus, he claims to have learnt to carve "when Time was young" while yet "in the womb" and notes mysteriously that he was taught by "my father. By that I mean my grandfather" (82). The stage direction describes Jamike as "*peering at the voices in the garden*" and listening to a "*forest of hands singing beneath their breath*" (83). As is typical in Irobi, chanting and dancing provide the final stimulus for achieving possession, and for the period of its duration, Jamike is the embodiment

of a potent force: "With the speech he has whirled himself into a frenzy. He pushes the mask to the paddle of hands below the window. They remove the cock and bare the face to him. He smashes an egg on the face. The singing and the drumming rise to a deafening crescendo. The hands disappear slowly. Jamike now tears off the jumper and uses it to wipe the grey powder on his hair. His voice changes to normal" (83-84). For Irobi, as for Soyinka, the paraphernalia of ritual has its own powers, exerting a tangible effect upon the ritualised body.

While, however, there is at least some measure of consistency between Jamike's and Nwokedi's convictions in their sober moments and in their states of possession, in *The Fronded Circle*, at the peak of his experience of possession, Gilbert ceases completely to be himself. He instead assumes the identity of Onwutuebe and confesses the latter's crimes with fatal consequences for both: "I tied up my head. I hid it in a pot and buried it in my yam barn. I sacrificed my five sons in exchange for my life" (*Fronded* 72). Gilbert is Irobi's classic alienated African intellectual through whose fate he illustrates the fine distinctions between life and death, and between a secular performance and a sacred enactment. Irobi's exploration of Gilbert's hubristic attitude towards the indigenous culture as seen in Gilbert's approach to a cultural process of canonisation as mere "play" makes Igbo funerary music central in the scheme of the work. Meki Nzewi's particularly insightful study of the focal *Ese* music (in collaboration with two master *Ese* musicians from Ngwa, Tom Ohiauraumunna and Israel Anyahuru) is all the more revealing as it was based on ethnographic work among the Ngwa people in Irobi's own part of Igboland.

Describing the *Ese* as an exemplary drum-speaking instrument, Nzewi notes its distinctiveness while setting in special relief the singular musical and metaphysical propensities of "the spirit-drum" in the *Ese* ensemble "used, musically, for punctuating melodic phrases as well as for

playing percussive sequences— “rhythmic pounding” (*isunkwa*). In drum-speaking the “spirit-drum” is used for shades of voice-drops that are of phonemic essence in the Igbo language” (95). The strength of Nzewi’s article is twofold: his fascinating explorations of the discourse of African drum-speaking and his illumination of the elemental funerary drama among the Igbo in which the Ese plays a crucial role. Basically idiomatic in construction and implication, appropriating significant tonal peculiarities and poetic modes of language discourse, “[d]rum-speaking is a formal process, characterised by terse statements and phonemic interspersions. Statements could be proverbial or metaphoric or allegorical. A terse phrase or statement is stated, and could be repeated exactly or sequenced on another tone level, before the next sentence/phrase. Drum-speaking is commonly of poetic essence” (94). However, ostensibly limited in its resources, given all that is possible in the art, it is the complexity of drum-speaking that is striking rather than the sense of restriction. The Ese uses set formulaic expression to announce a death and simulation of the sound of a weeping voice to evoke pity; pricks the conscience of the guilty; turns attention away from death and reclaims life as a worthwhile experience through the exaltation of human achievements; and through name-calling venerates the distinguished people present at the funeral. But even more crucially, the master Ese musician is “the principal agent that invokes the supernatural actors whose metaphysical presences are evoked and immanent in the event atmosphere” (97). Irobi’s appropriation of this tradition in *The Fronded Circle* is condensed but thorough.

In *The Fronded Circle*, the Ese spirit drum is described as “an old, weather beaten short drum disfigured with dirty eggshells and age” (*Fronded* 61). Danced to only by the accomplished who in the process declare their achievements to the acclamation of the audience, the Ese music is death to the desecrating feet of the unaccomplished. The dialogue

between Nwannediya and Diegwu (when the latter and Onwudinulo seek to use Nwannediya to lure Gilbert to the dance) clearly indicates this:

- Diegwu: We just want him to dance.
Nwannediya: Dance? Don't you know what it means
when a man steps on that male Ese
drum to say what he never achieved.
Diegwu: You don't understand. He will be
saying it for his elder brother-
Onwutuebe.
Nwannediya: Does it matter whom he says it for [?]
What matters is that as far as he has
stepped on that drum, as unaccomplished
as he is, he is doomed to die. (*Fronded* 51)

To the extent that the Ese incorporates the panegyric, its core is a testament made on oath of ascertainable accomplishments exemplifying communal values and virtues. The integrity of the deceased as well as that of the declaimer is placed both under public and superhuman gaze, and the elements of dance and play do not obliterate the solemnity of the ritual canonisation process. The daunting drama inheres in the tension of the paradox of a death-dance that is an affirmation of life and in a play that is characterised by the gravity of a final rite.

Nzewi considers dramatic dialogue to be crucial in the Ese performance event and cites Ohiaraumunna to contend that Ese is a solemn cosmic drama in which the living and the dead reaffirm the cultural ethos of the people in the declamations of the achievements of the deceased, usually by the first son:

I call the name of the entitled actor (who is on stage to declaim on the *Ese*-spirit oath). The actor runs to the compound entrance as I pound the race-theme [. . .] to prompt him. When he races back to the presence of the drum stand, he puts his right foot on the spirit-drum. I cadence the race-

theme, and immediately change the music to the chant-accompanied, declamation section of the *Oso nkwa* (martial music compartment). Over the orchestral background of this section, I query the declaimer on the *Ese* drum, as follows—if he is the first son of the deceased: “Mgbaji! Nna gi, O mere gini eme? O mere gi eme? (Mgbaji! Your father, what did he achieve in life, to merit being buried by the *Ese* music?). For it is the *Ese* music that symbolically buries as well as canonizes into ancestry, a meritorious adult male person. (Nzewi 98)

This episode is followed by another in which the first son of the deceased “undertake[s] another race to the entrance of the principal road leading into the compound. The entrance to a compound is a sacred spot. It marks the neutral boundary between the human occupants of a compound and the supernatural forces who interact, as ever present, immanent, and affective spirit essence, in that particular human abode” (Nzewi 98). He thereafter declaims, also on oath, his own accomplishments that qualify him to bury his father with *Ese* music. He then makes a “final race, to ‘embrace’ the spirit forces at the entrance of the compound” and returns to a celebration in dance of his successful performance of the *Ese* (99). The rite of passage that Irobi transforms into a play is in reality a solemn display and his attitude is characterised by awe rather than interrogation or censure. Writing on this form of funeral performance among the Igbo, Helen Chukwuma enunciates its dramaturgy:

The audience assembles in the front compound space of the deceased's house. They are seated in two blocks at one end forming a semicircle with the assembly. The drummers start the music and the actors, four men dance out into the centre of the semicircle towards the drummers. Music ceases and the first actor steps forward and salutes the audience. He addressed first, the audience on the right, and then the audience on the left. (317)

Remarking that the audience on the right is greeted as "humans" and that on the left as "spirits," and that the latter unlike the former do not respond to the greeting, Chukwuma notes that the ceremony is not only a tribute to the living and the dead but also "rehearses the meaning and significance of death" (317). In this solemn convocation of humans and spirits, the accomplished are presumably folk-heroes exorcising the fear of death in a symbolic ritual dance which reclaims life as an experience of value by *staging* human achievements. Society thus revivifies its values by ritually foregrounding its privileged cultural accomplishments in the face and in defiance of death. In Irobi's next play, *Cemetery Road*, the illustrious dead return to earth in the form of a masquerade.

Typically, Irobi's appropriation of dance and music is a highlight of his art in *Cemetery Road* as in his other works. Deployed at crucial moments of the action as thematic and structural markers, the songs, music, and dances range from the elegiac, evocative, laudatory, satiric, sensual, provocative, celebratory, and exhortative even to the occasional Christian religious praise, though given Irobi's dominant themes of death and military dictatorship, there is a certain preponderance of dirges, war songs, and martial music. The play begins with a funeral procession and an Igbo dirge, "Udu m akuwala," ("My Pot Has Broken"), particularly appropriate at the funeral of one who died young. The comparison of life in the dirge to fragile china is consistent with Irobi's general theme of human mortality. He does not reproduce the full text presumably because of its popularity in the Igbo culture. Moreover, if he chooses this particular dirge for the initial and focal moment of the play, Irobi very possibly envisaged that his usual suggestion that producers of his work choose equivalent song texts from the culture in which a play is being produced could easily be realised both by the song's theme of impermanence and its foregrounding of the clayey human constitution.

Several other times in the play, Irobi uses dirges to evoke

the atmosphere of foreboding or as a premonition of the imminence of doom with astonishing effects, the most devastating in impact no doubt being the episode prefiguring Mazeli's funeral. Through with their singing of both traditional and Christian dirges, and the snuffing out of their symbolic candles, the couple's mothers and their church group withdraw, with Somadina refusing to go with her mother. In the background of the enveloping night and tense silence, Mazeli's security measures read like an ominous prefiguration of the aloneness of the grave, and Somandina's anguish a powerful image of her looming widowhood: "[Mazeli closes the door. Locks the iron grid. Turns. SOMADINA is standing at the foot of the staircase, her face strewn with tears. As he hugs her in consolation, and leads her up the stairs to the bedroom, the choir raises the funeral song to its highest volume into the ears of the night, and LIGHTS]" (63). Yet it is probably in his use of martial music in *Cemetery Road* that Irobi is most detailed and at his most ingenious.

In Irobi's adaptation of the dramaturgy of traditional dance-drama, musical and dance forms only occasionally—often in culturally pivotal moments—reach their full nonverbal semiotic potentials; otherwise, they are usually supplemented by poetry or ordinary language, depending on the level of intensity the playwright seeks to achieve. Yet even when music is not centre stage, it almost never completely recedes from the consciousness of Irobi's audiences, as it ceaselessly insinuates its haunting presence and all it prefigures to provoke a mood, to invoke presences, or to play other roles. At the outset of the play, the dirge "Udu m Akuwala" is initially "intoned" and "wells up" only when Professor Madubujuala dwells on the inevitable tragedy of the scholar who assumes the responsibility to transform the human estate impoverished in a condition of military siege. It is otherwise "hummed" by the funeral procession as the backcloth of all of the speech. The dirge finally "rises to its fullest threnodic volume and dies out" as the

procession exits to make room for the initial action at "13 Cemetery Road, Abuja, Nigeria," with the background music suggestive of the source of terror: "In the distance a military band is playing and we can hear the commander drilling his soldiers with a voice as loud as blood" (*Cemetery* 8).

Throughout the play, martial music presages the presence of the military, especially underscoring their many acts of bestiality and monstrosity, now in the background, then in the foreground, but always laying a terrible claim on human imagination and awareness: "*The martial music wells up*" (10); "*The martial music and Commander's voice drilling his soldiers rise hugely in the distance*" (15); "*Martial music blares through*" (47); "*The martial music rises to a deafening pitch*" (53); "*Martial music begins to blare*" (71); "*The martial music begins to blare assisted by sound effects like the howling of beasts*" (81). As it is Irobi's suggestion that the volume of martial music be commensurate with the depth of the terror or savagery perpetrated, the torture chamber is logically saturated with it, since through an open widow "*martial music pours into the room*" (97).

Irobi's detailed discussion, in the torture episode, of the types of music and dance as well as their forms and values, and his characteristic disputation on music to ridicule the pervasive ignorance of the military would seem initially to detract attention from the ideological implication of the use of torture to perpetuate military hegemony. However, placed in proper perspective, the episode indeed illuminates some of the core principles in Irobi's general conception of the semiotics of music and dance. Colonel Dogon Burra has the sadistic inclination to associate a tortured victim's shuddering to electric shock with dancing and asks Mazeli to choose his favourite music track for the performance. Mazeli's defiant choice of Fela Anikulapo's powerful caricature of the military as unthinking, mindless, and robotic, "Zombie," recalls the scene of Mazeli's arrest when his students had used it to mock the soldiers:

[Fela Anikulapo's 'Zombie' begins to play. The students surround the soldiers, making faces at them and chanting the lyrics of the song. The soldiers keep them at bay with gun muzzles. As they take MAZELI away, the students follow them to a distance outside the classroom. Two hot headed ones rush in front of them and mime ridiculous military drills in tune with the lyrics of the song.] (Cemetery 85)

Irobi treats Colonel Burra's revelation of the exclusion of African music in the torture chamber as ideological: "Unfortunately, we don't play African music here. Only foreign" (100). The meaning of the cryptic declaration is extended by the torture-master's failure to recognise the jazz artist Louis Armstrong as a musician, and his exaltation of foreign pop artists. But they clarify and make insightful the colonel's earlier boast: "I was trained in Latin America, The Republic of South Africa and Iraq" (97-98). Moreover, the colonel draws enthusiastic attention to the foreign sources of his inspiration by a deployment of that powerful tinsel of nationalism, the flag: "Miniature flags of Britain, United States of America, Chile and South Africa are conspicuously displayed on his large table" (97).

Mazeli's Stations of the Cross are given revealing names: his bowl of oat sweetened with diluted hydrochloric acid is likened in its impact to "dry white German wine" and is called "English breakfast" in South Africa (99) and "his warm up lunch," the electric shock, for which music is prescribed, is called "the Yankee Doodle" in Latin America (100). Irobi is deliberately staging the clash of values in the postcolonial state arising from a mindless mimicry of foreign models in the adoption of foreign music and dance, which he denies the quick of the human spirit that springs in song because they are implicated in torture and the perpetuation of a tyrannical hegemony:

[The record [Michael Jackson's "I'm Bad"] begins to

play. The Colonel dances. Attempts the moonwalk, fails. Then the electric bugaloo. Moves with it to the wall and switches on the cable. As MAZELI begins to shudder from the electric shocks, the COLONEL picks up the mike and sings, imitating Michael Jackson. Grabbing his crotch every now and then he screams "I'm bad . . . I'm bad . . . You know it" into MAZELI's ears]. (102)

But even in this episode, Irobi's indictment of the Western media as purveyors of unwholesome images of Africa and disseminators of distinctive Western values, even when questionable, as the paradigmatic postmodern human heritage remains unwavering. Rigor Mortis claims to have learnt from CBS television and Voice of America that Michael Jackson had recorded "Moon Dancer" and learnt "moonwalking" on the moon! Rigor Mortis's exemplary military buffoonery quite apart, his citation of the Western media as the source of so much cant reiterates Irobi's position in the text. It is indeed revealing that in the final and most powerful dance movement of the play, the masquerade dance, Irobi should again place the Western media on centre stage.

The students' masquerade procession enters to the chant of a war song, a genre, which unlike martial music, Irobi endows with both performative grandeur and mythical-mystical power in all its occurrences in the play, as it exemplifies the expression of the exalted human will to resistance. The rare moment of exaltation in the otherwise unrelievedly anguished narrative of the Bakalori peasants is their reminiscence of their heroic but doomed defiance of the formidable assemblage of modern Western armament: "[The set explodes into a violent but carefully choreographed war dance sustained by a war song. Even the blind peasants take part, rooted to their spot, using their walking sticks to mime as guns]" (27). In another context, Irobi refers to the "ritual energy" of another war song and its capacity to push the chanters to the brink of possession and accentuate the dark intensity of their intention,

which is to murder a corrupt government official on stage (42). Offstage, the cast make use of the same song to mark and celebrate resistance as a heroic necessity, "some swaying to the music with slow sinuous yet defiant gestures" (47).

In *Nwokedi*, the text of the masquerade procession chant "Ari Konko Ogu lee" is reproduced in full to map the progressive and inevitable capitulation of the chanter-dancer to the overwhelming power of the descent and triumphant epiphany of the spirit. In the final movement of the masquerade dance in *Cemetery Road*, even that intensely stirring song makes way for a sterner and more rousing chant and dance, "Igbaala egwuike mbu?" ("Ever Danced to Powerful Music Before?"). Superhuman energy is certainly an attribute of Irobi's description of the Mask's response to Douglas's reenactment of Hazel's abomination of an earlier scene. But even more crucially, the chastened journalists, reborn in the wake of their symbolic losses and mimed immolation, are partakers in a potent ritual of spiritual transformation:

With incredible fury, the Mask falls on the camera, brings out the tape, smashes it on the floor, pulls out the ribbon and tears it to pieces. Pounces on the camera. HAZEL tries to help DOUGLAS. The Mask clutches at the tape in her hand, opens it, brings out the ribbon and rips it to pieces. Still chanting the song, the students circle both correspondents and make stabbing gestures with their daggers. Then, they take their camera and bearing it like a spoil of war, they dance out. The two correspondents are left on stage. As a dirge begins backstage, HAZEL is sobbing and DOUGLAS is visibly broken. LIGHTS! (148)

Bess Reed has contended that the spiritual aspects of masquerades are "fundamental to their appearance and performance among Igbo people. Through the agency of the masker who wears the costume, the invisible spirit is made physically tangible" (50). She identifies among the functions of Masquerades, according honour to virtuous ancestors,

showering blessings and abundance on the living, punishing miscreants, and, even more crucially, making the “mysterious powers of the spirit realm visible to the members of the village in which the spirits live. Spirits are omnipresent but unseen for the year until they appear in masked form” (50). Reed discerns in the rhetoric of cultural revitalisation in Nigeria in the 1990s a “nostalgic reminiscence [that] indicated anxiety about a century marked by colonialism and military dictatorship” (55). She highlights the revival of the masquerade tradition in Enugu State (the political capital of the Igbo nation) in the early 1990s as a paramount example of the recreation of performative modes and rationales to reflect new political goals while maintaining the masquerade's roots in a long and venerated tradition (59). Living and writing at Nsukka near Enugu city in the late 1980s, Irobi presumably was in the vanguard of his generation's endeavour to transform the foundering postcolonial state by revitalising morally and spiritually regenerative traditional institutions and ideals. He had his eyes on the ground in his daring mining of the spiritual treasury of the masquerade for secular pearls.

Irobi's experimentation with maximising the physical contact between the stage and the audience to highlight the ideological compact between the theatrical experience and the historical comes to a culmination in *Sycorax*. That bond, pivotal in his rethinking of the concept of the theatre in his “Author's Note,” is manifest in his designation of the active audience as “spec-actors,” as they are virtual members of the cast. The bond reaches an ominous peak in the episode in which Caliban plays the fidgety suicide bomber with explosives strapped all over his body and mingles with the audience. The precariousness of life and the arbitrariness of death in an insane world fixated on its own self-destruction are crucial Irobi's themes; and the potential implication of all, not just an abstract body of oppressors, is the point of his demonstration through Caliban. The obverse of this embrace of death is the moment of the

consummation of that communion in music and dance. Irobi's emphasis on the peculiar demands of the (cultural) context of performance ensures that he considers that audience reception of music in the theatre is enhanced by the appeal of a tradition of music and lyrics that they are familiar with. The initial entrance of Caliban and his band singing Eric Donaldson's 1978 Jamaican Festival Song Competition award-winning tract, "This Is the Land of My Birth," sets the tone for Irobi's choice of reggae as the dominant music of the performance. Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley, URoy, and Shabba Ranks all take their turn, their familiar lyrics eliciting robust participation from the "audience" both in terms of singing and dancing. Typically, the themes of the popular songs chosen coalesce with Irobi's and enhance them. It is, however, through Irobi's evocation of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* that he firmly establishes a basic spiritual link with a fundamental aspect of his earlier work: ritual sacrifice.

Stravinsky's 1912 *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) with its theme of a pagan sacrifice of a maiden to propitiate the gods of spring had caused a major furore at its premiere on 29 May 1913 in Paris. Peter Gutmann's account of the event remarking on the choreography, costumes, and sets, which carefully dispenses with grace and beauty to set in bold relief awkward, primitive starkness, justifies the conjecture that Stravinsky's appeal for Irobi may well lie both in his theme and clamorous appropriation of dissonance, given Irobi's own emphasis on the turbulent temper of the post-*Tempest* world:

Stravinsky's music is an absolutely brilliant component of the ballet, which opens in a wondrous evocation of the first promise of Spring and concludes in vicious human sacrifice. The score ranges from a plaintive folk tune to huge, pounding blows, from placid reverie to grating dissonance, and from bounding grace to irregular metric fragmentation. Stravinsky didn't set out to destroy tradition, but his jagged rhythms, wild harmonies and violent dynamics sidestepped the

predicament of tonality and pushed music into a new dimension. In the process, he gave birth to so much of the music of our time. (Gutmann n. pag.)

In Irobi's play, *The Rite of Spring* is invoked in the episode of Stephano and Trinculo's drunken reminiscences on Prospero's life in Milan. Their account of his necromancy coalesces with that of his creation of theatre and is followed by a moment of intense silence in which Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* erupts. The incoherence in the accounts, of course, is telling, but so too is Irobi's presentation of Prospero's practice as necromancy in a reversal of Shakespeare's codification of black magic as evil and white as divine. Miranda's account of Prospero's murder of Sycorax reinforces the theme of ritual murder and necromantic practice in his building of his magic shrine on Sycorax's grave "to draw strength from her remains. (*pause*) And what remains of her magic powers and energies. (*mimicking Prospero*) 'The energy of the Caribbean earth is like living in a cemetery,' my father told me. 'Very good for my profession. Very good for magic!'" (Sycorax 51). Stravinsky's chilling theme enhanced by his pounding "primitive rhythm" resonates with and makes focal Irobi's location of the canonical white playwright's white-magician in the spiritual darkness that many Europeans thought conceivable only in association with Europe's Other. But the challenge of the African playwright appropriating an indigenous African theatrical tradition to depict Caribbean experience is ultimately to draw on correspondences in the general black experience. In this regard, Irobi's attention to reggae music is a gloss on the substantial influence of African music on that popular Caribbean form. However, it is his exploitation of African drumming that evokes deepest spiritual insights.

Irobi calls the ritual preceding the enunciation of his model commonwealth in *Sycorax* "a rite of passage" and a "ritual of exorcism" through Ariel (dressed like a Rastafarian and with an Ethiopian tea pot) who prepares the participants for the

experience (69). Irobi obviously underscores the liminality of the event. If Shakespeare's problematic location of the island in the heart of nowhere in particular seems resolved by its firmer Caribbean anchorage in *Sycorax*, Irobi nonetheless stresses the shipwrecked Italians' sense of a liminal space that he indeed enhances by the invocation of Jimmy Cliff's popular reggae number "Sitting Here in Limbo." Ariel further establishes their status as neophytes by taking them through a course on the history of colonialism and their own implication in its violence and expropriations. Their communal ceremonial consumption of marijuana is presented as communion, and the impact of the culminating state of possession is the levelling of all humanity, which the masking and stripping of neophytes accomplish through symbolism. It is in his role as moral instructor that Ariel tells them: "Smoke it and feel that desperate arrogant Aryan desire to subjugate and exterminate all other peoples of the world subside [. . .] You will realize that there are other people, different in complexion, all around you, who live in this world [. . .]" (121). As is typical in Irobi, the mystical impact of the drum remains a pivotal component of the experience:

(One by one they stand up groggily and as Ariel begins to drum, they declare, philosophically, their epiphanies, while gazing steadily into the gigantic swirl of marijuana smoke they have created, as if it was a humungous crystal ball)

Adrian: *(shaping it with his hands)* I see a brave new world, a world in which there will be no more trail of tears, no more Native Americans massacred like buffaloes, their skulls scalped, their land, history and destiny turned into hunting trophies and hung on our wall like the antlers of slaughtered antelopes . . .

Sebastian: A world in which there will be no more holocausts, no more gas chambers, no more children's shoes gathered in a heap at the doors of the great incinerators and crematories of our history . . . and (*he is crying now*) . . . no more ashes fluting through charred clay chimneys into a wintry European sky . . .

Antonio: (*like a benediction*) A world in which there will be no more world wars, no more bloodshed, no more body bags, no more beheaded children . . .

Alonzo: . . . no more massacres, no more genocides, no more ethnic cleansing, whether in Europe, Africa, North America or Indonesia . . . (*Sycorax* 121-22)

With characteristic iconoclasm, Irobi presents his vision of the ideal commonwealth as a marijuana-induced reverie, and thus as more delusion than utopia. He nonetheless valorises it as a resolution to terrorism, which he presents as the expression of paranoia, the mortal disease inflicted on the oppressed through social dispossession and economic deprivation and of which suicide bombing is the most extreme expression. The congruence between the sources of inspiration and those of lunacy in Irobi's work, as in Soyinka's, remains problematic and is particularly exacerbated by the paradoxes of the postcolonial experience. Soyinka's engagement with the state of suprarational consciousness as an aspect of the ritualistic or religious experience and as a realm of potentially creative or destructive energy never ceased to fascinate Irobi.

Irobi perceives in Soyinka's drama the latter's recognition of analogous states of mind in many forms of humans' approach to God. In varying forms of traditional African worship and Christianity, Soyinka discerns the same impulse

that characterised the peak of the Maenads' worship of Dionysos. Thus, in his adaptation of Euripides's *The Bacchae*, Soyinka achieves the humanistic intercultural feat of linking "the Greek Dionysos with Ogun and Jesus and links Dionysian rites and Christian rituals with carrier and scapegoat purifications for the New Year in Nigeria" (Nouryeh 166). In Soyinka's evocation of the distinctiveness of mind in which mortals could commune with the superhuman, he privileges music and dance, arguing that music is "the intensive language of transition and its communicant means, the catalyst and solvent of it regenerative hoard" (*Myth* 26). Acknowledging Soyinka as pioneer and model, Irobi treats the polymusicality of the postcolony as a metaphor of divergent and competing ideologies and thus imbues music with greater political consequence. Through drumming, dancing, and masking, Irobi's protagonists attain a state of possession in which their decisive (often provocative political) acts are performed. If Irobi equates mental dispossession caused by social marginalisation with Dionysian irrationality and thinks it merely capable of achieving catharsis, he valorises spiritual possession as a mystical state in which the deepest craving of the human individual for freedom expresses itself without inhibition against all the tyrannies of society.



Conclusion

Edward Said's appraisal of cultural resistance as a sequel to his seminal recognition in *Culture and Imperialism* of both a pervasive pattern of imperial culture and a historical experience of resistance against empire foregrounds the preeminent place of Caliban as an "inaugural figure" in that narrative. Rooting the debate in the Latin American context, which he, however, considers paradigmatic in spite of its specificities, Said translates the basic form of the set of alternatives to the Ariel-Caliban choice:

[H]ow does a culture seeking to become independent of imperialism imagine its own past? One choice is to do it as Ariel does, that is, as a willing servant of Prospero; Ariel does what he is told obligingly, and, when he gains his freedom he returns to his native element, a sort of bourgeois native untroubled by his collaboration with Prospero. A second choice is to do it like Caliban, aware of and accepting his mongrel past but not disabled for future development. A third choice is to be a Caliban who sheds his current servitude and physical disfigurements in the process of discovering his essential, pre-colonial self. *This* Caliban is behind the nativist and radical nationalisms that produced concepts of negritude, Islamic fundamentalism, Arabism, and the like. (*Culture* 258)

Said's position is that both Calibans in reality need and reinforce each other, and that while the awareness of one's subjugation is crucial for anti-imperial nationalism, the risk of replicating the old orthodoxies is best avoided "when Caliban sees his own history as an aspect of the history of all subjugated men and women, and comprehends the complex truth of his own social and historical situation" (*Culture* 258). However, by insisting on the virtual inviolability of the Shakespearian paradigm—Ariel, the bourgeois native, Caliban Prime, the Mongrel, and Caliban Supreme, the "Nativist" and father to Negritude, Islamic fundamentalism, and Arabism—Said demonstrates its necessary insufficiency.

Irobi inherits the limitations of that paradigm. However, in his recreation of the character of Caliban in *Sycorax*, Irobi points to his knowledge of Caliban's dynamic figuration in varying reinscriptions of *The Tempest*. Caliban's constantly changing names in *Sycorax* is symbolic of the competing conceptions of his identity and his incremental assumption of new roles—actor, stage director and performance theorist, musician, activist, author, suicide bomber. This dynamism inscribes the character as the archetypal bondsman in eternal metamorphosis in the shifting element of his aspiration to sovereignty and dignified selfhood. By his incarnation of diverse attributes and the dynamism in his approach to life's unfolding challenges, the willingness to explore the indigenous and the strange, the metaphysical and the technological, the old and the new in the awareness of his needs, Caliban incarnates the hybridity that defines Irobi's postcolonial theatre: a synthesis of many traditions, and the privileging of recuperation and appropriation as recreation. The fundamental insight in Irobi's revision of the ending of *The Shipwreck* is indeed the avoidance of a historical foreclosure that would have made his negotiation of the postcolonial condition in all his earlier plays illogical. By Caliban's resolution to let the colonisers depart alive, he chooses the challenge of contending with their enduring interest in his

island.

Irobi's detailed examination of the "continuities of African ontology, teleology, semiology and narratology" in the New World in his 2003 interview with Nnorom Azuonye revealed to him the survival patterns of African orature through its capacity for hybridity. Even more crucially, Irobi emphasises the pivotal role of orature in enabling the African diaspora to create a new sense of identity:

Concepts and notions of creativity and performance, ritual and festive models were translocated to the new world during slavery and these elements helped our people to negotiate new identities and create new syncretic cultures. We see some of these elements of African orality in the work of Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, the music of blues and jazz musicians and most vividly in the African-American gospel music and worshipping style etc." ("My E-conversation" 49)

Irobi's exaltation of Africans in the diaspora for their penchant for a creative use of African orature and his bitter indictment of Africans on the continent for their failure to fully appropriate that rich resource draws attention to his own sustained exploration of Igbo ritual, festival mode, and elements of performative heritage as crucial for cultural survival in the postcolony. With their deep and venerable roots in tradition, Igbo rituals and myths are artfully reconfigured in Irobi's drama where, even when they serve to endow the rites of governance with traditional moral authority, they live in their secular incarnation. Especially in a corrupt postcolonial society fixated on materialism, Irobi cultivates the civic value of the moral authority of tradition. In turning rituals into the ore for his drama and often haunting the abode of the gods, Irobi repeatedly explored the liminal space of transition in which vagaries in the perception of the oracular voice of the gods and the gods' own inscrutable moods contextualised his fascination with inspiration and madness, fundamentally linked to his constant exploration of social dispossession and

mystical possession. However, while Irobi was enthralled by the otherworldly rites of poetic inspiration, he made his primary provenance the right to worldly transformation.

Sycorax's replication of the European colonist's fixation on power and material fortune, even when her history privileges a contrary trajectory, sets in relief the colonial heritage Irobi denounces through the traditional priest's avowal of ritual poverty and powerlessness in his early play *The Colour of Rusting Gold*. Irobi's career-long theme is resistance through violent revolutionary activism, music and dance, painting, sculpture, and theatre; he is also fixated on the typical irresponsibility and corruption of the Nigerian leadership. The voices of the dirging but defiant blind and dispossessed Ibiaye in the Niger Delta in *Hangmen Also Die*, and those of the chanting, deprived but irrepressible unemployed youths in diverse parts of the country depicted in *Nwokedi*, and those of the keening decimated but resolute peasants in the northern city of Abuja in *Cemetery Road* coalesce as a national anthem that is, however, no mere threnody, but a veritable war chant. The awakening of the consciousness of oppression and the strategic cultivation of that awareness and insight for the responsible repositioning of society is central in Irobi's project as an artist.

Irobi has not always received the attention that he deserves from compatriot critics because he is considered too combative and his work too violent and inclined to the melodramatic. A.B.C. Duruaku makes a standard comment when he complains that *Nwokedi* "is awash with images of death, blood and violence" (89) and fears that the "kind of literary freedom exploited here may well encourage the monster called censorship" (92). Irobi's protagonists certainly meditate on bloodletting as mystical and redemptive, and devote themselves to the vocation of (ostensibly political) violence with religious fervour. Their belief in the efficacy of arms is apparently absolute: "There is a place in the sun . . . For everyone with a gun" (*Nwokedi* 84). While the ancient rite of the Ekpe, of which

they are the current custodians, survives by its capability to adapt—changing its sacrificial victim from a man (in ancient times) to a ram in modern society—Nwokedi and the Ekumeku are tragically bent on a regression to the primordial order.

Irobi's advocacy of revolutionary violence, however, is constantly interrogated by his awareness of its limitations. His heroes are invariably trapped in a tragic web, an ironic consequence of the vicious circle of violence that they exalt only as a perversion. Nwokedi and the Ekumeku fail in their aspiration to exploit the proclivity of the antistructural freedom of a deeply affective festival like the Ekpe to revalidate ancient mores to which they ascribe greater potency. The play ends with a folk song that censures Nwokedi's uninhibited blood lust, and expresses a representatively sombre, chastened awareness of the grave implications of bloodshed: "An evil year has died with its ugly burden. An evil year has crawled past hunch-backed with grief and anguish. The hungry earth is gorged with blood [. . .] And blood is the rain that falls upon the land" (*Nwokedi* 93). The pattern is the same in *The Other Side of the Mask*.

Jamike confesses to Njemanze, "Honestly, there are times when I wish all the world was made of mud, so I could scoop it into the hollow of my palm, sculpt it, potter it into a shape, into a beautiful pitcher, take it to the river, fill it with water and returning, smash it on the jagged boulders along the river's slope!" (*Other Side* 68). Were the world a log of wood, he adds, he would chisel it into a shape like a beautiful figurine and then "[s]hove it into the fire like a faggot" (*Other Side* 68). However, especially in the final illumination of the descent into death, Jamike recognises the mortal consequences of his act of murder, and his alternative route to social harmony and reconciliation holds radiant possibilities for a contemporary world caught in the crossfire of terrorist and antiterrorist attacks:

Mine is the hindered hand. Hindered by hate and neglect.

Mine is the callused palm. Callused by toil and anguish.
 Mine is the hand denied its garlands by your acts of
 subterfuge. Yet may this hand so veined with rage, on
 opening, give back not spite or hate, but light, sunlight, and
 like the sun-flower, the fragrance of forgiveness. (*Other Side*
 64)

Paradoxically, then, neither Caliban's election for suicide bombing, which closes the earlier version of *Sycorax, The Shipwreck*, nor the "epiphany of a responsible human family" that warrants the revision introduces a new trend in Irobi's drama.

Irobi's recurring figuration of his protagonists as intellectuals and artists as well as the embodiment of his own visions, experiences, and roles appears to inscribe them as possible surrogates. The picture that thus emerges paradoxically is one of incredible self-esteem and tragic miscarriage of ambition. Jamike is in this regard particularly representative. Supremely assured of his talent, Jamike sees laurels nonetheless as symbolic public validation necessary for an artist's consolidation of his self-image. His deep passion for preeminence leads him to approach every creative endeavour as a soul-searching quest for ultimately unattainable perfection, a daring gesture for the elusive ultimate laurel. As Irobi's symbol of the representative visionary artist seeking a transcendence of the wreckage of history and the seductions of the human herd through his art and yet paradoxically condemned to the judgement of society, Jamike in his self-acclamation is absolute: "I am the next [master artist]! The next! The very next! I am a genius! Everything I touch turns into gold. Everything I create is an ultimate masterpiece" (67). But with the denial of the national Prize for sculpture for six years, doubts assail him and undermine his self-esteem. Appraising his work in a moment of deep sad self-introspection, Jamike is confronted by the image of ultimate futility:

(*[C]aresse the works*) I thought there was craft here. I thought

there was beauty here. I thought there was ecstasy here. Industry! Energy! Sincerity! Honesty! Truth! Power! Love! And Triumph! I thought there was art here. But they say there is none. (*He covers the works*) Perhaps I have nothing to offer the world. Nothing. No message. No talent. No gift. No flint of genius. Nothing. (*Other Side* 53-54)

Irobi thought literary awards contingent with politics. In making Professor Njemanze, the chairman of the national award-giving panel for sculpture in *The Other Side of the Mask*, draw Jamike's attention to the extraneous factors rather than to the intrinsic qualities that account for the award of prizes, Irobi presents canonisation through the award of prizes as a cynical performance: "[Y]ou must also understand that simply because a work wins an award does not mean it is better than all the others submitted. In fact it does not even mean that [it] is a great work of art or a meaningful contribution to society, humanity" (64-65). However, when he seeks international recognition, Jamike receives it at the first attempt. But he is already driven to suicidal despondency by a haunting sense of failure. At thirty, Jamike already had his epitaph carved on the door of his bedroom:

There is beauty in my breast
Even here where all things rest
I am the flower of the twilight
That blossomed in the night. (*Other Side* 15)

Interestingly, the epitaph first appeared in Irobi's work under the title "My Epitaph" as the first poem of the collection *Inflorescence (Selected Poems 1977-1988)*. Irobi was twenty-nine when it was published in 1989. By sharing the epitaph he wrote for himself with Jamike, Irobi privileges that artist-character as a possible studio self-portrait. Moreover, his own desperate yearning for laurels as emblematic public recognition is equally well documented. In his 2007 interview, he acknowledged his need of prizes for validation and his feeling that the processes

of the award of the Association of Nigerian Authors' Prizes had been politicised. Irobi was particularly disparaging of Tess Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches*, that was preferred to his *The Colour of Rusting Gold* for the Drama Prize in 1985. Oguibe's reminiscences of Irobi's failed bids to win the Association of Nigerian Authors' Prizes set in relief Irobi's anguish and tenacity:

[E]specially between 1986 and 1989, Esiaba Irobi was at the height of his powers as a poet, playwright, actor and theatre director. One of his great motivators was the annual award competitions run by the Association of Nigerian Authors. Each year he would submit at least two full-length manuscripts in both the poetry and drama categories, all meticulously bound. Each year he would end up a runner-up, but never a winner. He would curse the "impotent" and incestuous" judges and do a routine of showing them his arse in absentia. "Philistines" he would say, "who have no understanding of what poetry is." In other countries, he would remind me, people appreciate their youths, recognize their talent, and encourage their efforts, "but here, they pull the cotyledons with bare hands and leave them on the sidewalks to die." He would stew and curse for a day or two, metaphorically turn out the Association of Nigerian Authors and its "senile" judges just like he turned out our bedsit every morning looking for his toothbrush, and then, he would be back at work, always on two or three manuscripts simultaneously, ready for the following year. (n. pag.)

By an uncanny coincidence, Irobi, much like Jamike, won the prestigious Nigeria LNG Prize for drama in 2010, posthumously.

Irobi's work on occasion reads like a late draft that would have benefitted from a final close revision, and so often lacks the enigmatic finesse and finality that distinguish the best of the work of Soyinka, whom he idolised; he often tends towards the melodramatic in language and in action and seemed to find it impossible to resist obscene innuendoes even at moments of great dramatic intensity. But Irobi was still growing as an

artist and he lacked access to the formidable accessories associated with standard publishing. Moreover, he fought many grim battles against a legion of forces he discerned as inauspicious to his meditation on the Muse. His tenacity, not his capitulation, defined his response. It is certainly his distinction that by his recuperation of the resources of the Igbo performative heritage, by his revivification of Igbo mythic roots, and by his daring recreation of Igbo household gods in the light of contemporary experience, Irobi stands in the same relation to indigenous Igbo theatre as Chinua Achebe stands to Igbo folklore and Soyinka to Yoruba theatre. Irobi, moreover, incarnates both his generation's fiery temper and its deep craving for peace. He will therefore continue to demand our attention.

Intimations of immortality are recurrent in Irobi's work, both drama and poetry. His epitaph is a testament to the triumph of artistic beauty even over death. In the final poem of *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems*, his last published collection of poems, Irobi repeatedly evokes the myth of the eternal return, itself a myth of the immortality of the human spirit. Irobi *inscribed* the many immortal cries of his tormented artist-characters for recognition and the acceptance of their work as part of the human heritage. But his sustained contemplation of oral literature filled him with even deeper awe by his discovery of the immortality of the oral artist in the undying traditions of the people and the abiding power of oral literature to survive by self-renewal in prevailing circumstances. Following Soyinka's magnificent example rooted in the Yoruba tradition, Irobi was devoted in his study of the enduring legacies of the oral Igbo tradition, but easily perceived the pervasiveness of basically the same tradition in other African cultures; he believed the translocation of this tradition in the diaspora to be awesome, as it was *embodied* not written. And the innovativeness that he brought to bear on his appropriation of that tradition as actor, stage director,

performance theorist, and playwright to illuminate and transcend the limitations of his postcolonial society is his legacy as a stage artist.



Notes

Introduction

1. A comprehensive list would include such titles as: *Am I Too Loud?*, *A Tent to Pass the Night*, *Why the Vulture's Head Is Naked*, *What Song Do Mosquitoes Sing?*, *Foreplay* (commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre, London, England), *Moremi* (a version of the Moremi myth that the Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan had explored in *Moroutodun*), *The Colour of God's Skin*, *Piano and Drums*, *Odenigbo*, *I Am the Woodpecker That Terrifies the Trees*, *Zenzenina*, *John Coltraine in Vienna*, *Miles Davis in Paris*, *Canada Bound*, *Harlem*, *Who Is Afraid of Alvin Ailey*, *Nobody in Town Can Bake a Roll as Sweet as Mine: The Story of August Wilson at Heavensgate in Search of Bessie Smith*, *The Harp* and an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* titled *Iyago*.

Irobi sent copies of several of these manuscripts to me; his widow, Uloaku Irobi, has also graciously let me see electronic versions of several others. However, she noted she could not find more than a few pages of some and suspected they were not completed. Irobi's close friend and colleague Olu Oguibe noted his habit of adding titles of works that had barely gone beyond proposal stages to his biographical entries, even providing dates of publication

and names of publishing houses (usually mainstream). Oguibe interpreted the inclination as Irobi's response to his haunted awareness of his mortality in his final illness. If that is so, then the penchant that led him to include (even in some of his earliest publications) some titles that remained unpublished at the time of his death in his list of "Other Titles by the Same Author" certainly deepened with time and circumstance.

2. J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada in his review of *Cotyledons* notes that the "poems are mostly cast in a conversational mode" and comments on the poet's ability to "combine meaning with music in a most shocking yet articulate way" (729). Similarly, in the blurb of *Nwokedi* and *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems*, the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi likens Irobi's language to music.
3. M.J.C. Echeruo drew my attention to Irobi's usual failure to rein in the distinctive robust language of his poetry in the dialogue he ascribes to his characters.
4. In an email sent to me on 6 March 2010, he referred to *The Colour of Rusting Gold* as his "first successfully DAMAGED play by Ofo Heritage Publishers" and lamented that he had "never seen a work of art so beautifully destroyed."

Chapter One

1. Irobi was responding by email to my question on his experience of playing the role of Elesin. (Martin Banham recalls that Irobi had been incandescent with anger on watching a 1990 Peter Badejo production of *Death and the King's Horseman* at the Royal Exchange, Manchester. The director had George Harris, who played Elesin, jumping up and down on the spot during Elesin's dance through the market and Irobi was adamant that the movement was utterly wrong.)
2. Similarly, privileging the South African situation, Michael

Chapman complains that “the post-paradigm, as currently applied to literary studies, is too generalized to lend to any particular postcolony the subjective, experiential temper, the human and imaginative condition of living that should be the distinctive contribution of the literary act, whether in its creative or critical manifestation” (66).

3. In a recent interview, Echeruo observed: “What did the Greeks do that I am calling for? The Greeks converted a cultural festival into a secular event; made a new mythos out of the same ritual and gave it a new meaning, or message, what I have called its *dianoia*. Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides—they all were using the same basic material, but each one had a slightly different take on the underlying ‘story’ to project a meaning different from what the ritual prescribed. And that’s what Irobi is doing with *Amadioha* and the spirits that attend to us” (66).
4. Christopher Balme considers the incorporation of rituals and myth-based material into a theatrico-aesthetic context a basic feature of syncretic theatre. Balme identifies this ritual transposition as highly problematic, as it “involves demarcating the blurred crossover points between theatre and ritual” and as capable of causing “substantial conflicts for indigenous dramatists,” though it has the capacity to reinvest theatre with a communal religious spirit lacking in Western theatrical practice (66).
5. Amankulor considers “history, cultural artifacts and symbols, movement and the arts” possible parameters for the reconstruction of the core story imbedded in traditional dramas, but suggests that the “overwhelming density of the oral tradition” may make it less objective for such a purpose. (“The Art of Drama” 38-39).
6. Novak considers the body and structured movements as social realities that interact with and interpret other aspects of culture and contends that such structured movement

systems like “social dance, theatre dance, sport, and ritual help to articulate and create images of who people are and what their lives are like, encoding and eliciting ideas and values; they are also part of experience, of performances and actions by which people know themselves” (103).

7. Metuh discerns in many Igbo prayers to the spirits a tone of “contractual *do ut des*” (“Give that I may give,” that is, “mutual exchange.”). He notes that that attitude, notably, is usually lacking in prayers to the Supreme Being. But he adds: “However, the offerer is confident that God will grant his request because prayers ‘obtain’ among the spirits—that is, prayers can dispose God to accede to human petitions” (346). Indeed, Metuh identifies the rubbing of one’s palms on each other as a basic ritual gesture among the Igbo symbolic of “pleading persistently, which is what prayer, (*ekpele*) means to the Igbo” (339).
8. I. Chukwukere concurs: “[I]n character with general Igbo thought on relationship between man and supernatural beings, good or bad chi is not an absolute gift. A bad one can be prayed to and propitiated in order to reverse the ill hands of fate; in the same way a good chi has to be regularly sacrificed to and placated in order to keep up its benevolence” (526).
9. Thelma Altshuler and Paul Janaro contend that humanism, which they define as the belief in the perfectibility of humankind, is the authentic stimulation of true tragedy and the pivotal condition shared by Sophocles’s Athens and Shakespeare’s London, though they were separated by two thousand years. Arguing that no great tragedy was written in the intervening time and ever since, they note further: “Most of the writers who have attempted to imitate that belief without living in an era which accepted it have been able to write only imitations of the form but not the spirit of great tragedy” (183).

10. Achebe's narrator in *Arrow of God* points out that the Feast of the New Yam "brought gods and men together in one crowd. It was the only assembly in Umuaro in which a man might look to his right and find his neighbour and look to his left and see a god standing there—perhaps Agwu whose mother also gave birth to madness or Ngene, owner of a stream" (202).

Chapter Two

1. Adetokumbo Abiola suggests that there are only losers in the contest, Ogun/Soyinka being a casualty of his "penchant for bombast" (13).
2. For a detailed account of Irobi's adaptation of Marxism, see Leon Osu.
3. In a perceptive review of the play, Nwachukwu-Agbada observed that it was first staged in 1983. However, Georgina Alaukwu-Ehuriah, recalls that an early draft of the play had been their third year group's daring choice for a class examination production in 1982 before the play was then commissioned in December of the same year as the University's Convocation Play (16-17).
4. Of the many images of liminality that he identifies in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Dan Izevbaye privileges the moon as central: "the crescent moon whose waxing Soyinka turns into the treacherous symbol of the eventual cultural hegemony of the white man: for is Pilkings, whom Elesin perceptively describes as 'the white ghost' and the 'twin-brother' of the moon, not the symbol of the new order?" (163).
5. The sixth ceremony of the Ekpe festival cycle is called *Ize Mmuo* and is about the divine election of the Chief priest, *Eze Alumerechi* by the village goddess, *Alumerechi*. The anguish associated with the experience of the election for both the candidate chosen and the people arises from the perception of the permanent estrangement of the priest

from physical contact with the people as symbolic of death. His permanent hermitage is accentuated by his occasional appearances at night: "*Eze Alumerechi* appears only at night to deliver messages from *Alumerechi*. Such messages are shouted from the compound gates of whoever they are meant for" (Amankulor, "Ekpe Festival" 116)

6. Irobi submitted this article on 3 March 2009 for consideration for a special issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* on Nigerian literature that I edited and that was eventually published in 2011. The article was provisionally accepted for publication but was not in the end used because he was too ill at the time to undertake suggested revisions and provide the bibliography. (He had used a pattern of citation that made it too challenging in the circumstances to trace all his sources.)
7. Nwachukwu-Agbada notes, though, that in making two of Nanimgaebi's kinsmen describe him as "the only one among us who rose from grass to grace" and as one who "rose from rags to riches," Irobi appropriates English rather than Igbo speech. Ironically, Nwachukwu-Agbada's own illustration of Irobi's triumphant recapitulation of Igbo expression in English is suspect too: "Like a mad man I must mutter melancholy melodies to mellow the mightiest moment of madness." Nwachukwu-Agbada's fascination with the statement is probably traceable to the sustained effect of the old device of alliteration found in English poetry, a figure that is hardly recognisable in Igbo discourse.
8. In a review of an early production of the play at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1990, Chidinma Madukaife thought the costuming, stage movement, and choreography dexterous, and highlighted the blending of colour symbolism and language to set in relief the violent and tragic import of the play. Madukaife found particularly memorable "the choreographic stage motion and acrobatic

- displays of the hangmen's exploits" which "spell-bound the audience, albeit for too long" (28).
9. Writing on the bacchanalian rites that characterised the worship of Dionysos, Robert Luyster notes that at the climax, the female maenads tore apart bare-handed a calf or kid (possibly even a human being) and devoured the flesh raw (44). Remarking that "Maenad" and "maniac" share the same root, Luyster notes the role that wine and music played in inducing that irrational state. In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi treats terror as an inspired, Dionysian irrationality induced by material dispossession
 10. Alaukwu-Ehuriah calls *The Colour of Rusting Gold* "extremely hilarious but profoundly tragic" and traces the response of the initial audience of the play to that hilarity in part to Irobi's depiction of madness: "The sight of a pot-bellied politician carrying a brief case full of money, with his paw-paw coloured girlfriend in tow, being frog jumped, wheeled round in his agbada and held prostrate on the floor at gun point by a mad-boy when two of them met in the waiting room of a famous native Doctor made theatre goers almost choke with laughter." (17)

Chapter Three

1. Ake Hulkrantz defines ritual as a "fixed usually solemn behaviour that is repeated in certain situations. Anthropologists like to call the latter 'crisis situations,' but there is not always any crisis involved. It would be better to speak of sacred situations in Durkheim's spirit" (136).
2. It is equally illustrated in an Igbo myth of the origin of death. Offered the opportunity by Chukwu Okike, God the creator, to choose between immortality and mortality, humans had of course chosen the former, and sent two emissaries to God, one with the message of life and the other with that of death. But the dog, the human messenger for life, so self-conceited with his swiftness and physical

strength, especially in comparison to the tortoise, the messenger for death, merely fiddled on the way, hoping to outrun the tortoise in the final lap of the race to God. He overslept, and the tortoise got to God first with the message that humans had chosen death, which God granted.

A variant of the story has it that the tortoise placed his relations in strategic positions on the route, with the result that in spite of the dog's swiftness, a tortoise was always ahead. At any rate, both versions censure the dog, significantly representing humankind, for the delusions that led it to believe that in the mother of all races, all that was needed was physical prowess and skill.

3. Geoffrey Nwaka has argued that despite the reputation of secret societies as initiators or facilitators of organised anticolonial resistance in some parts of Nigeria, especially in the early phase of colonialism, the trend towards administrative traditionalism in post-First World War colonial rule virtually coopted such societies as collaborators of the regime. He reappraises the gruesome murders that took place between 1942 and 1945 in the Abak-Opodo division in the Cross River area and which later came to be known as the "Leopard menace," as they were discovered to be carried out by the Ekpe Owo, or "Leopard men" society, to refute suggestions that they constituted anticolonial rebellion and to underscore their various local motivations. Nwaka's indications of the painstaking disguises in the murders involving the use of wooden leopard claw prints and leopard hair, which initially fooled medical pathologists and the police into blaming wild beasts for the murders, foreground cultic appropriations of "masking," of which Bensor's transformative category is the obverse.
4. Inexplicable misfortunes, disasters, tragic miscarriage of good intentions, and mysterious ailments, including bouts of lunacy, are considered symptomatic of Agwu possession

among the Igbo. Aguwa, who documents a catalogue of these afflictions, notes: “*Agwu* makes one an unfortunate victim by manipulating all situations in one’s disfavour” (42).

5. Christopher Okigbo, the Nigerian poet of Igbo extraction, in a 1965 interview with Marjory Whitelaw had noted about his art:

I am believed to be a reincarnation of my maternal grandfather, who used to be the priest of the shrine called Ajani, where the Idoto, the river goddess, is worshipped. This goddess is the earth mother, and also the mother of the whole family. My grandfather was the priest of this shrine, and when I was born I was believed to be his reincarnation, that is, I should carry on his duties. And although someone else had to perform his functions, this other person was only, as it were, a regent. And in 1958, when I started taking poetry seriously, it was as though I had felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions as the chief priest of Idoto. (qtd. in Anozie 42)

6. Chinua Achebe considers *mbari* particularly revealing of the sophistication of Igbo phenomenological thought. He writes with awe in *There Was a Country* of his discovery of this art among the Owerri Igbo:

A mud house was built with decorated walls and crowned with either corrugated metal or a thatch roof made of intricately woven palm leaves and spines. Inside, center stage on an elevated mud platform, an observer would find life-size sculptures of the constituent parts of the Owerri Igbo world: Alusi—deities—such as Otamiri and Ani, the earth goddess; and men, women, children, soldiers, animals, crops, and foreigners (mainly Europeans), all seated. The inclusion of the Europeans, a great tribute to the virtues

of African tolerance and accommodation, was an example of the positive acknowledgment of strangers who had ventured into their midst. There would also be depictions from ancient mythology, as well as scourges, diseases, and other unpleasant things. The purpose of this art form was to invoke protection from the gods for the people through the celebration of the world these villagers lived in—in other words, through art as celebration. (18-19)

7. Afam Ebeogu's play *Sever This Cord* explores an equivalent experience and designates it by the name *asisa* (*Rhythms* 35). In Ebeogu's play, however, unlike in Irobi's, exorcising this powerful fetish is an occasion for the triumphant display of faith by a Pentecostal minister.
8. In his dedication of *The Fronded Circle* to Amankulor, Irobi acknowledged him as pioneer and pathfinder: "Whose heavier footsteps / stamped out a shining pathway / into the sacred arena / within the fronded circle / where bow-legged drums / dirge softly; THE MUSIC / OF THE DEAD" (iii).

Chapter Four

1. In one of the not so many decipherable entries in a 1998 diary, Irobi wrote: "I was crushed in England. / Crushed like limestone at / a quarry. Crushed until my sense / of self ran like sand in an / hourglass. And ran out. / I was crushed in England" (28 July).
2. In an email sent on 14 October 2011, Irobi's confidante, Georgina Alaukwu-Ehuriah noted: "Esiaba completed *Cemetery Road* at Leeds. While he was writing it, he asked me to send him videos of martial music and the opulent areas of Ikoyi, Victoria Island and some parts of Abuja which I had to commission an NTA reporter to make for me. I was working in Ministry of Defence Headquarters Lagos at that time." In 2006, when I met him for the first

time in London, Irobi gave me the manuscript of *Cemetery Road* for his publisher, Mr Asomugha.

3. In the 2007 interview with Leon Osu, Irobi talked at length and with great passion about making films and teaching screen writing in indigenous Nigerian languages.
4. Femi Osofisan has drawn attention to the self-conscious theatricality at play in his drama *Morountodun*,

the play continually breaking out of its conventional narrative mold to declare its artificiality, its self-referentiality; the preference for an episodic rather a linear sequence of narration; the conspicuous use of flashbacks, of the play-within-the-play, riddling games, music, song, and spectacle. The play deliberately foregrounds the question of illusion and reality, by continuously juxtaposing scenes from myth and history; from the present and the past; and from the play's present, and the real present, such that the audience is made aware all the time of the options available, and those chosen. (9)

Osofisan's cryptic indication of the play's possible affiliation with Brecht's Epic Theater is an oblique suggestion of indigenous sources of inspiration equally valid and applicable to a writer like Irobi who was devoted to the study and appropriation of those practices.

Chapter Five

1. Noting the inherent multiple referential capability of the island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—the New World, the Mediterranean, England itself, Ireland—Ania Loomba writes:

The multiplicity of locations that can be read into the play also indicates the historical interconnections *between* different encounters—the Irish experience, according to some historians, prepared the English for

their American forays, while according to others, attitude to native Americans coloured English opinions about Moors. Thus, the multiple valences of *The Tempest* remind us of the global connections inaugurated by colonialism. (*Shakespeare* 167)

Similarly, Bowen notes that the island

is somehow both in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean; Shakespeare clearly wanted to engage with a double liminality—Europe's border with Africa and the Islamic world, its former 'other world,' and its border with North America, the 'New World'. The courtiers' puzzling dispute about whether Carthage is identical with Tunis points to the play's doubled location, the slippage in time and space between its twin liminalities. (94)

2. I identify "Shakespeare," Irobi's character, by using the scare quotes.
3. Joseph Khoury holds the controversial opinion that Shakespeare's Caliban is "such a complex, intelligent, poetic and resistant creature" (23) and that Shakespeare's play is the source of the Hegelian structure of Aimé Césaire's understanding of the master/slave relationship in *A Tempest*: "Césaire's intertextual mechanism affirms his belief that Shakespeare's play is an anti-colonialist text co-opted by the colonizers as a means by which to justify the exploitation of the other. Césaire's play becomes a kind of scrubbing cloth with which to clean up the layers of ideology imposed on *The Tempest*" (25).
4. Irobi's theory is apparently interrogated by European art history in which every text is arguably the product of the revision of past texts. Shakespeare's own texts revised both the literary and historical sources he used and, being bedded in Elizabethan culture, in turn have been the favourite subject of revisions in the theatres of different

cultures and generations. But Irobi is fascinated by the distinctive accentuation of this practice in oral cultures where every performance or narration is endowed with the status of an original and sovereign production, and the artist is not subject to the authority of any original anterior text. There is in reality no “original” version adapted or revised by others, but autonomous variations on the same resonant subject or theme.

5. In 1983, Irobi submitted to Ossie Enekwe a drama script titled “Put Out the Houselights” for the course “Creative Dramatic Writing.” In many respects, the script anticipates the interest in the Pirandello-like fascination with staging the backroom of the theatre. He dedicated the work to several individuals and to “the Oak Theatre / that put me on the bare boards / and gave me a passion.”

Chapter Six

1. Writing on a corresponding moment in Ola Rotimi’s *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Femi Osofisan notes: “Rotimi discards drums and other instruments and relies solely on the raw, authentic power of the human voice. Thus, either consciously or unconsciously, the play becomes powerfully evocative of other tragic moments in human history, when songs alone are all that is left for a helpless people about to be slaughtered” (7).
2. “The Sea is life!” is the final statement of *Hangmen Also Die*.
3. For a version of the story of Ogun’s decimation of his own people of Ire, see Adeboye Babalola (156).



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. . . a great and monumental job which must have called for much midnight toil and patient scholarship. The detailed analysis of each play, the examination of the Soyinka antecedents, and the exegetic use of the literature of Igbo studies are truly impressive. Irobi comes over as a brilliant and energetic-minded man of the theatre with a satiric wit and creative love of language.

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Esiaba Irobi's adventurous and often innovative playwriting deserves much greater recognition. Isidore Diala's study fills an important gap in our knowledge of contemporary Nigerian theatre.

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Professor Diala, meticulous as always, has managed most admirably to respect both the fact of Irobi's volatile temperament and Irobi's amazing ability to provide material in the very vehemence of his work for that necessary corrective choric insight which enables us begin to see the world whole. This is an important book.

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